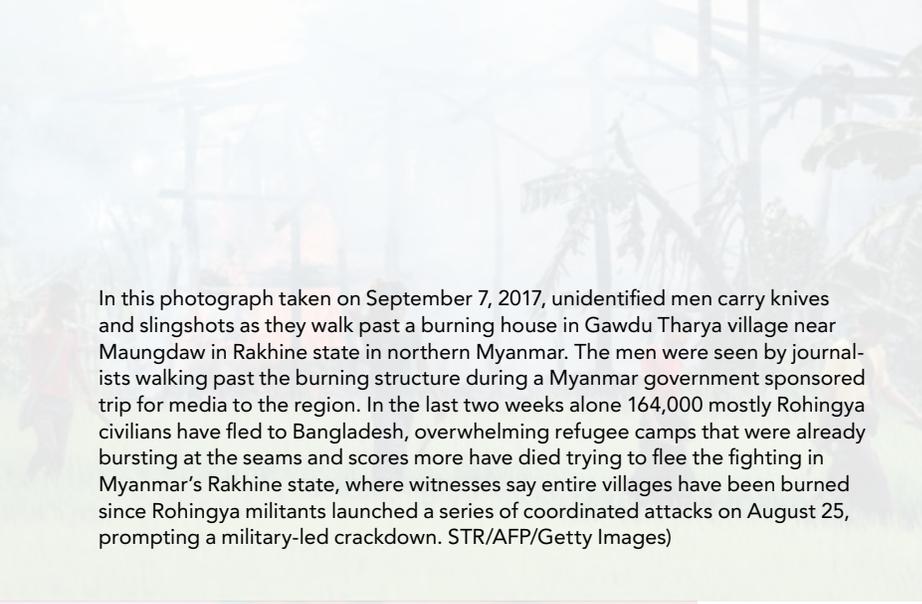




UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2018 ANNUAL REPORT
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

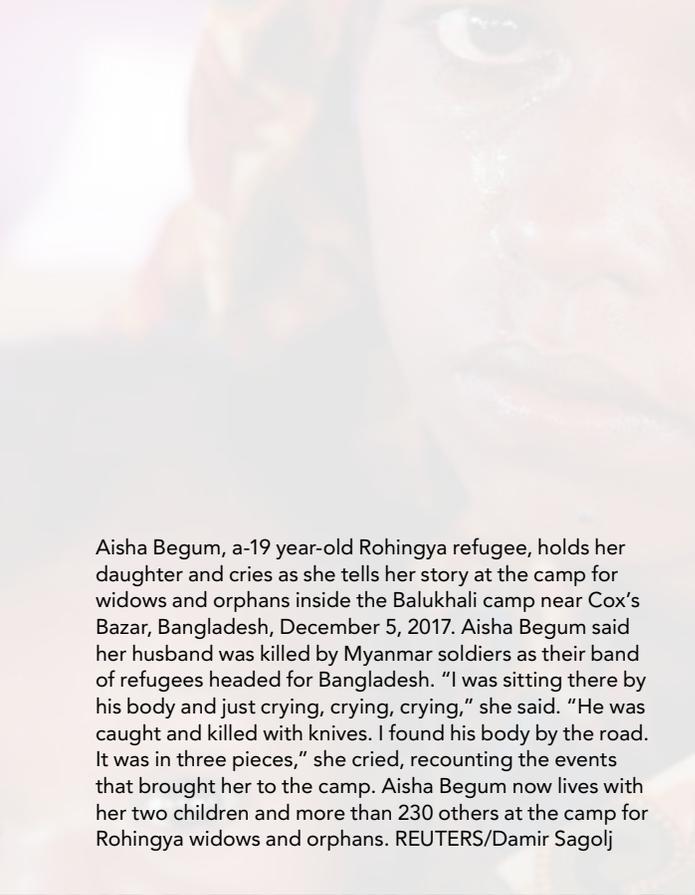




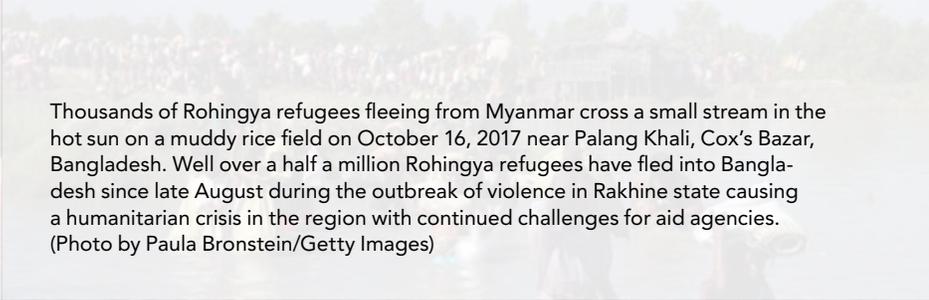
In this photograph taken on September 7, 2017, unidentified men carry knives and slingshots as they walk past a burning house in Gawdu Tharya village near Maungdaw in Rakhine state in northern Myanmar. The men were seen by journalists walking past the burning structure during a Myanmar government sponsored trip for media to the region. In the last two weeks alone 164,000 mostly Rohingya civilians have fled to Bangladesh, overwhelming refugee camps that were already bursting at the seams and scores more have died trying to flee the fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where witnesses say entire villages have been burned since Rohingya militants launched a series of coordinated attacks on August 25, prompting a military-led crackdown. STR/AFP/Getty Images)



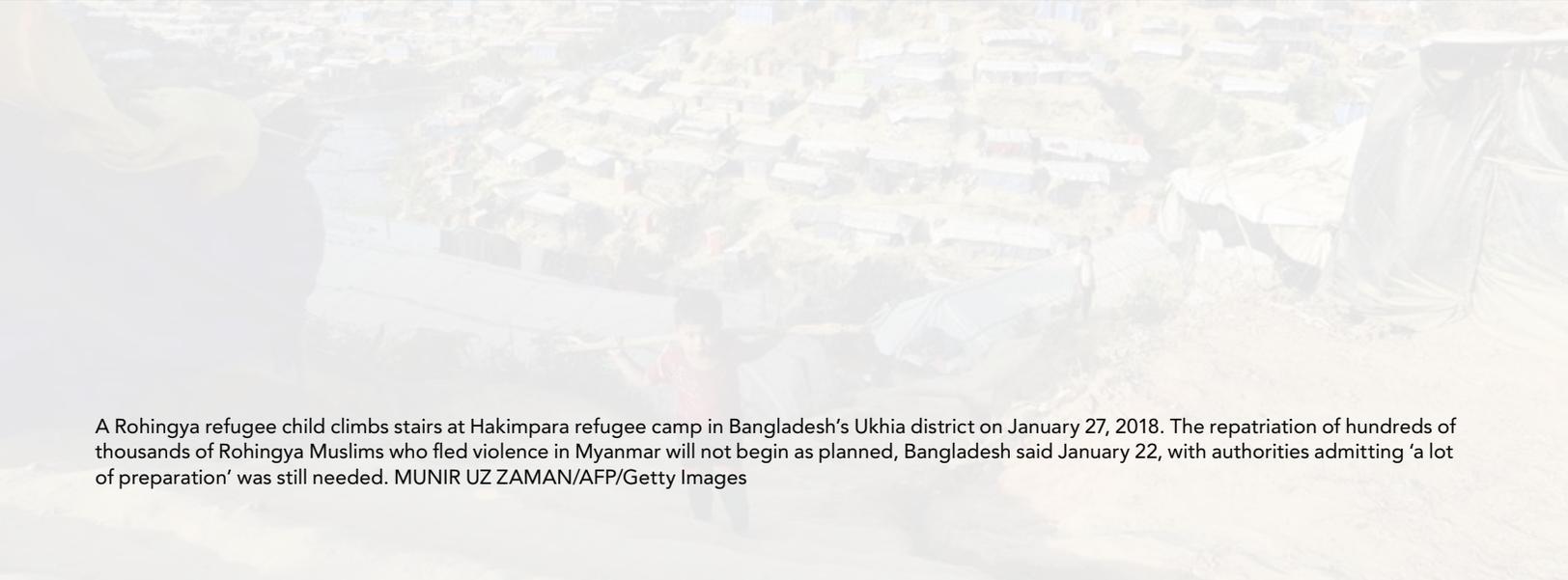
Supporters and monks belonging to the hardline Buddhist group Mabatha rally outside the US embassy in Yangon on April 28, 2016. The Buddhist ultra-nationalist group denounce the US embassy recent statement related to the deaths of the Rohingya Muslim minority from the April 19, 2016 boat accident in Sittwe. ROMEO GACAD/AFP/Getty Images)



Aisha Begum, a 19-year-old Rohingya refugee, holds her daughter and cries as she tells her story at the camp for widows and orphans inside the Balukhali camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, December 5, 2017. Aisha Begum said her husband was killed by Myanmar soldiers as their band of refugees headed for Bangladesh. "I was sitting there by his body and just crying, crying, crying," she said. "He was caught and killed with knives. I found his body by the road. It was in three pieces," she cried, recounting the events that brought her to the camp. Aisha Begum now lives with her two children and more than 230 others at the camp for Rohingya widows and orphans. REUTERS/Damir Sagolj



Thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing from Myanmar cross a small stream in the hot sun on a muddy rice field on October 16, 2017 near Palang Khali, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Well over a half a million Rohingya refugees have fled into Bangladesh since late August during the outbreak of violence in Rakhine state causing a humanitarian crisis in the region with continued challenges for aid agencies. (Photo by Paula Bronstein/Getty Images)



A Rohingya refugee child climbs stairs at Hakimpara refugee camp in Bangladesh's Ukhia district on January 27, 2018. The repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who fled violence in Myanmar will not begin as planned, Bangladesh said January 22, with authorities admitting 'a lot of preparation' was still needed. MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP/Getty Images

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This abbreviated version of USCIRF's 2018 Annual Report provides a quick reference to the Key Findings and Recommendations made to the U.S. government. The full report may be found at www.USCIRF.gov.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in countries across the globe in 2017. This ongoing downward trend often intersected with authoritarian practices characterized by hostility toward dissent, pluralism, independent media, and active civil society, or took place under the guise of protecting national security or countering terrorism.

In the 28 nations addressed in this report, governments and nonstate actors targeted religious minorities, dissenting members of majority communities, and nonreligious persons. The most severe abuses included genocide and other mass atrocities, killings, enslavement, rape, imprisonment, forced displacement, forced conversions, intimidation, harassment, property destruction, the marginalization of women, and bans on children participating in religious activities or education.

For example, in 2017 in Burma's Rakhine State, the military and security forces, along with nonstate actors, committed what the United States and United Nations labeled "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims. In China, the government created police states in Xinjiang and Tibet to persecute Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists and continued its brutal treatment of Falun Gong practitioners. In Cuba, government officials detained religious leaders and activists who advocated for religious freedom. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued its genocidal campaign against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'a Muslims despite losing territory, and the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias in Syria increased sectarian attacks against Sunni Muslims. In Nigeria, the government failed to prevent or stop increasing violence along religious lines or hold perpetrators to account. In Pakistan, the country's strict blasphemy laws and increased extremist activity further threatened already marginalized minority communities, including Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Shi'a Muslims. In Russia, the government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and prose-

cuted for extremism peaceful Muslims and "nontraditional" groups, including Scientologists. In Turkey, the continued unjust detention of American Pastor Andrew Brunson had a chilling effect on Christians.

In addition to endangering individuals and communities, severe violations of religious freedom threaten the stability and security of nations and regions, underscoring the importance of U.S. efforts to address and prevent abuses of this fundamental human right. As this report details, U.S. law provides a range of tools to pressure egregious religious freedom violators—including in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act—which the U.S. government should utilize fully. In addition, both the Trump Administration and Congress should amplify their international religious freedom efforts by: working with international partners, humanizing the issue by focusing on prisoners of conscience and victims of blasphemy laws, and stressing the importance of empowering women to fully exercise their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

Among the range of universal, interdependent human rights, the freedom to follow one's conscience in matters of religion or belief is essential to human dignity

Among the range of universal, interdependent human rights, the freedom to follow one's conscience in matters of religion or belief is essential to human dignity and human flourishing.

and human flourishing. Its full protection requires the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; as a result, its expansion also bolsters these other fundamental rights.

This report is based on a year's work by Commissioners and staff

of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad, assess violations and progress, analyze U.S. policy, and develop independent policy recommendations. The results of USCIRF's work are provided through its findings and recommendations in public statements and reports.

In 2017 and early 2018, Commissioners and staff visited 12 countries to assess conditions: Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Central African Republic, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Ukraine (regarding Russian-occupied areas), Burma, Bangladesh, Bahrain, and Iraq. In addition to its country monitoring, USCIRF prioritized several thematic issues during 2017.

The first theme was advocacy for specific prisoners through USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#), to shine a light on their cases and press for their release. A focus on these individuals makes concrete and understandable the human impact of unjust laws and policies and underscores the need for reform. During the year, several religious prisoners of conscience highlighted by USCIRF were released from prison.

The second theme was the issue of blasphemy laws, to highlight both their [incompatibility with international human rights principles](#) and some of the [individuals](#) affected by their enforcement. These laws exist in at least 69 countries worldwide and should be repealed.

The third theme was [women and religious freedom](#), to explore the synergies between freedom of religion or belief and women's equality and dispel the common misperception that there is a clash between

these two universal human rights. In fact, women's rights to religious freedom and to equality are indivisible and interrelated, and freedom of religion or belief can play an important role in responding to harmful practices imposed on women in the name of tradition, culture, or religion.

While religious freedom violations in many parts of the world continue to be grave, there are real reasons for optimism 20 years after the U.S. Congress' land-

mark passage of IRFA. Severe violations still occur but are less likely to go unnoticed. The U.S. government, once nearly alone in this effort, has an increasing number of partners with which to work on freedom of religion abroad, including

international organization entities, foreign government bodies, and a global parliamentary network. The media and civil society in the United States and abroad are more focused on international religious freedom issues than ever before. And the growing recognition of freedom of religion or belief as a tool to empower women provides an opportunity to expand the coalition of those advocating for religious freedom for all, to include individuals and organizations interested in promoting women's rights.

While religious freedom violations in many parts of the world continue to be grave, there are real reasons for optimism 20 years after the U.S. Congress' landmark passage of IRFA.

2018 ANNUAL REPORT OVERVIEW

Created by the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) of 1998 (IRFA), the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the U.S. State Department, that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on its statutory mandate and the standards in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and other international documents.

The 2018 Annual Report documents religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2017 in 28 countries and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The report is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA and provides recommendations to bolster U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief abroad.

The second section highlights 16 countries USCIRF concludes meet IRFA's standard for "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, for the period covered by this report, which USCIRF refers to as Tier 1 countries. IRFA requires the U.S. government to designate as a CPC any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations, meaning those that are systematic, ongoing, and egregious. The State Department most recently made CPC designations in December 2017, naming 10 countries, based on violations in 2016. At the same time, the State Department named

In 2018, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate the following 10 countries as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF also finds that six other countries meet the CPC standard and should be so designated: Central African Republic, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

Pakistan as the first—and only—country on its Special Watch List, a new category created in 2016 by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) (Frank Wolf Act) for governments that engaged in or tolerated severe violations but are deemed to not meet all the criteria of the CPC test.

The third section of the Annual Report highlights 12 countries USCIRF categorizes as Tier 2, defined by USCIRF as nations in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government during 2017 are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" CPC standard.

In 2018, USCIRF places the following 12 countries on Tier 2: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

Previous annual reports also included a section covering additional countries and regions that USCIRF monitored during the reporting year, but that did not meet the CPC or Tier 2 standards. The 2018 Annual Report does not include this section. USCIRF continues to monitor religious freedom globally but has decided to focus the annual report on Tier 1 and Tier 2 countries. The fact that other countries are not included in this report does not mean religious freedom issues do not exist in those countries or that concerns discussed in previous USCIRF annual reports have improved. Information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries may be found in the State Department's annual [International Religious Freedom reports](#). USCIRF also issues publications throughout the year on a variety of countries and topics, which can be found at www.uscirt.gov.

As USCIRF's annual reports have long recognized, nonstate actors are among the most egregious violators of religious freedom. The Frank Wolf Act requires the

*In this report, USCIRF uses the terms "religious freedom," "freedom of religion," and "freedom of religion or belief" interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief protected under international human rights law.

U.S. government to identify nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and designate them as “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. The law defines nonstate actor as “a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives.” The State Department did not make any EPC designations in 2017. However, on March 5, 2018, after the end of the reporting period, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson designated the following nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.”

In 2018, USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate the following organizations as EPCs: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

In 2018, USCIRF recommends three organizations for designation as EPCs based on their violations during 2017: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. USCIRF also continues to report, in various country chapters, on particularly severe violations of religious freedom perpetrated by nonstate actors that do not meet the Frank Wolf Act’s definition because, for example, they do not exercise territorial control.

| USCIRF 2018 | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>CPC Recommendations (Tier 1):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burma* Central African Republic China* Eritrea* Iran* Nigeria North Korea* Pakistan Russia Saudi Arabia* Sudan* Syria Tajikistan* Turkmenistan* Uzbekistan* Vietnam <p>*Designated as CPCs by the State Department on December 22, 2017</p> | <p>Tier 2 Countries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afghanistan Azerbaijan Bahrain Cuba Egypt India Indonesia Iraq Kazakhstan Laos Malaysia Turkey | <p>EPC Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)* The Taliban in Afghanistan* Al-Shabaab in Somalia* <p>*Designated as EPCs by the State Department on March 5, 2018</p> |

USCIRF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TIER 1 AND TIER 2 COUNTRIES

While the U.S. government must pursue freedom of religion or belief as a foreign policy objective within the specific context of each country covered in this annual report, certain common themes and policy options arise. The most common policy recommendations for states categorized by USCIRF as Tier 1 or Tier 2 countries appear below. These recommendations may not be

generalizable to all countries due to special circumstances, such as existing sanctions or lack of bilateral relations. Nonetheless, they represent the most pressing religious freedom concerns worldwide and the most promising avenues for addressing them through U.S. foreign policy.

| FOR TIER 1 AND TIER 2 COUNTRIES | |
|---|--|
| <p>USCIRF recommends the U.S. government pursue the following goals . . .</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urge the country’s government to cooperate fully with international human rights mechanisms, including by inviting visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; • Press the country’s government to bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards; • Press the country’s government to conduct professional and thorough investigations—and to prosecute perpetrators—of incidents of sectarian violence, terrorism, and other violations of religious freedom; • Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the country’s government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith; |
| <p>. . . through methods including these policy options.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter into a binding agreement with the foreign government of a country designated by the State Department as a CPC, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA (22 U.S.C. §6445(c)), setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster critical reforms to improve religious freedom; • Use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for religious freedom violations, including visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA (section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act) and visa denials and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and Executive Order 13818; • Raise consistently religious freedom concerns at high-level bilateral meetings with the country’s leaders; • Coordinate with other diplomatic missions and foreign delegations, including the UN and European Union, about human rights advocacy in meetings with the country’s officials and during visits to the country; • Ensure that the U.S. Embassy and U.S. consulates, including at the ambassadorial and consular general levels, maintain active contacts with human rights activists. • Help to train the country’s governmental, civil society, religious, and/or educational professionals to better address sectarian conflict, religion-related violence, and terrorism through practices consistent with international human rights standards. |

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

KEY FINDINGS

The [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) gives the U.S. government a range of tools to respond to religious freedom violations abroad and encourage improvements. Although no administration in IRFA's 20-year existence has implemented the law to its full potential, U.S. international religious freedom policy has been more robust since 2015. In 2016, the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) (Frank Wolf Act) amended IRFA to address implementation concerns and better reflect current conditions. During 2017, the Trump Administration emphasized its commitment to international religious freedom through statements from President Donald Trump, Vice President Michael Pence, and other high-level officials, as well as in the National Security Strategy. In a year of transition, there was no Ambassador-at-Large

for International Religious Freedom for most of 2017, and a U.S. State Department reorganization that would elevate the Ambassador-at-Large within the bureaucracy and increase the functions and staff of the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF Office) was not complete by year's end. In December, the State Department redesignated as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, the same 10 nations designated in 2016, and placed Pakistan on its new Special Watch List. The State Department did not designate any nonstate actors as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, in 2017. With Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback in place as of February 1, 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the Trump Administration has an opportunity to build on recent progress and fully implement IRFA, including the new tools provided by the Frank Wolf Act.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Ensure that the Ambassador-at-Large has the necessary authority and resources to carry out IRFA's mandates, including sufficient funding and staffing for the IRF Office.
- Appoint promptly a qualified and experienced individual to be Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council (NSC) staff, as IRFA envisions.
- Develop and issue a whole-of-government strategy to guide the U.S. government's promotion of religious freedom abroad for all, as well as action plans for specific countries, and establish an interagency working group, chaired by the Ambassador-at-Large, to oversee implementation.
- Implement fully all of IRFA's and the Frank Wolf Act's requirements, including through diplomatic engagement; annual CPC, Special Watch List, and EPC designations; and corresponding actions—especially targeted actions such as visa denials and asset freezes against specific violators.
- Prioritize efforts to seek the release of prisoners identified by the State Department or USCIRF as imprisoned for their religious beliefs, activity, identity, or religious freedom advocacy, especially in countries designated as CPCs or recommended by USCIRF for such designation.
- Engage multilaterally to advance religious freedom abroad, including by participating in and supporting relevant United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) entities and activities and continuing to lead and participate in the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Resettle vulnerable refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution, through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and address the longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal that USCIRF has documented since 2005.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Ensure sufficient appropriations for the Ambassador-at-Large and the IRF Office to fully execute and effectively achieve IRFA's mandates.
- Focus on competence in international religious freedom during confirmation hearings for relevant officials in the State Department and other agencies.
- Hold annual oversight hearings on the implementation of IRFA and the Frank Wolf Act, as well as hearings on specific religious freedom issues, and raise religious freedom in country-specific hearings and ambassadorial confirmation hearings.
- Support legislation that promotes freedom of religion or belief abroad and, through legislation and appropriations, develop an international religious freedom strategy.
- Examine, during delegation trips abroad, conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs or none, including by meeting with targeted religious communities, religious freedom advocates, and prisoners held for their religion or belief or their religious freedom advocacy.
- Participate in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#) to advocate for the release of prisoners of conscience abroad.
- Participate in the [International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), an informal network of legislators working to counter religious persecution and promote the internationally protected right to religious freedom.
- Exercise oversight of Expedited Removal and press for reforms to address concerns about the treatment of asylum-seekers in that process that USCIRF has identified since 2005.

LEGAL PROVISIONS

IRFA, as amended by the Frank Wolf Act, seeks to make religious freedom a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools:

Government Institutions

Inside the U.S. executive branch, IRFA created the position of Ambassador-at-Large (an appointee nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate), to head a State Department office focused on religious freedom abroad: the [IRF Office](#). The law also urges the appointment of a special adviser dedicated to the issue on the White House NSC staff, although no administration since the law's enactment has done so. The Frank Wolf Act reiterates this position's importance. Outside the executive branch, IRFA created [USCIRF](#), an independent body mandated to review religious freedom conditions globally, evaluate U.S. policy, and make policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

Monitoring and Reporting

IRFA mandates that the State Department prepare an annual report on religious freedom conditions in

each foreign country (the [IRF Report](#)), in addition to the department's annual human rights report. It also requires that USCIRF issue its own [annual report](#) setting forth its findings and providing independent policy recommendations. IRFA further requires the State Department to maintain country-by-country lists of prisoners and issues of concern for use by executive and legislative branch officials, and the Frank Wolf Act now requires that USCIRF, to the extent practicable, make available online lists of prisoners and other victims of governments or nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for CPC or EPC designation.

Consequences for Violators

IRFA requires the president—who has [delegated](#) this power to the secretary of state—to designate CPCs annually and take action designed to encourage improvements in those countries. CPCs are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. A menu of possible actions is available, including negotiating a bilateral agreement, imposing sanctions, taking “commensurate action,” or issuing a waiver. The Frank Wolf Act amends this provision to add a “Special Watch

List” category, in which the State Department is to place countries it deems to have engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. The term “severe violations” is not defined. No specific actions are required or delineated for Special Watch List countries.

The Frank Wolf Act also creates a new presidential designation for “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs, for nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe violations. The law defines nonstate actor as “a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives.” After the reporting period, the president [delegated](#) the power to make EPC designations to the secretary of state on January 26, 2018.

IRFA also makes inadmissible to the United States foreign government officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. The Frank Wolf Act now requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

IRFA defines “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom as “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, including violations such as—(A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; (B) prolonged detention without charges; (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or (D) other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.”

International Standards

Under IRFA, these reports and determinations are based on international legal standards: the law defines violations of religious freedom as “violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and religious belief and practice” as articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), and other international instruments and regional agreements.

Programs and Training

IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs. It also provides that State Department [Foreign Service Officers](#) and U.S. [immigration officials](#) receive training on religious freedom and religious persecution. The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make international religious freedom training mandatory for all Foreign Service Officers at certain points in their careers and to develop a specific curriculum for it.

Refugee and Asylum Issues

In recognition that religious freedom violations can drive displacement, IRFA includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy, including requiring that the president consider information about religious persecution as part of his annual determination of refugee admissions, and that immigration officials use the IRF Report as a resource in adjudicating refugee and asylum claims. IRFA also sought assessments of whether immigration officials were implementing Expedited Removal—a summary removal procedure that was new when IRFA was enacted—in a manner consistent with the United States’ obligations to protect individuals fleeing persecution, including by authorizing USCIRF to examine the issue.

DEVELOPMENTS IN 2017

High-Level Commitment

During 2017, the Trump Administration emphasized its commitment to international religious freedom through statements from high-level officials, including President Trump, Vice President Pence, and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. For example, in February, President Trump [called](#) freedom of religion “a sacred right” and noted the need to address threats against it, especially terrorism. In his April 14 weekly address, the president expressed hope for a future “where good people of all faiths, Christians and Muslims and Jewish and Hindu, can follow their hearts and worship according to their conscience.” In June, Vice President Pence [repeatedly stressed](#) that the Trump Administration would “condemn persecution of any faith in any place at any time” and that “protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority” of this administration. In

August, then Secretary Tillerson [stated](#): “Where religious freedom is not protected, we know that instability, human rights abuses, and violent extremism have a greater opportunity to take root. . . . The Trump Administration has committed to addressing these conditions in part by advancing international religious freedom around the world. The State Department will continue to advocate on behalf of those seeking to live their lives according to their faith.” In November, in a speech in Sudan, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan [stated](#) that “President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Secretary Tillerson have made clear that the protection and promotion of religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Administration” and that “the United States will not ignore violations of human rights, including the right to religious freedom” in its relationship with Sudan.

The December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#) also reflects this commitment. In its fourth pillar (on advancing American influence), the document states that the United States will champion American values, including by “supporting and advancing religious freedom—America’s first freedom.” One of the five priority actions in this area is “protecting religious freedom and religious minorities”; in this regard, the document declares that the United States “will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and religious minorities,” and will prioritize protecting minority communities from attacks and preserving their cultural heritage.

Ambassador-at-Large and Related Positions

On January 20, 2017, David Saperstein completed his service as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. During his 2015 to 2017 tenure, and with bipartisan Congressional support, the IRF Office expanded its diplomatic, policy, programmatic, and training activity and reinvigorated the CPC process. After the reporting period, on February 1, 2018, [Sam Brownback](#) was sworn into the position. President Trump nominated him in July 2017 and the Senate confirmed him in late January 2018. Ambassador Brownback, who most recently served as the governor of Kansas, is the fifth Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. As a U.S. senator from

1996 to 2011, he was a key sponsor of IRFA and a co-chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Pursuant to IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large is also an ex officio USCIRF Commissioner, and USCIRF welcomed Ambassador Brownback’s [nomination](#) and [confirmation](#).

Under IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large is to be a “principal adviser to the President and the Secretary of State regarding matters affecting religious freedom abroad” and, under the Frank Wolf Act, is to report directly to the secretary of state. In previous administrations, the Ambassador-at-Large had not reported directly to the secretary. In August 2017, as part of a department-wide reorganization effort, then Secretary Tillerson proposed that the Ambassador-at-Large report to the Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. The undersecretary is a more senior official than the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, to whom the Ambassador-at-Large previously reported.

Over the years, various administrations and Congress created other State Department positions with overlapping or related mandates, such as special representatives or envoys on religion and global affairs, to Muslim

The December 2017 National Security Strategy . . . states that the United States will champion American values, including by “supporting and advancing religious freedom—America’s first freedom.”

communities, to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, as well as a special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia. Most of these positions were empty during 2017. Then Secretary Tillerson’s reorganization proposal would eliminate the special representative or envoy positions relating to religion and global affairs, Muslim communities, and the OIC, and move their functions and staff into the IRF Office. The proposal also would move the position on religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia into the IRF Office and move the position on anti-Semitism into the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

CPC and Special Watch List Designations

On December 22, 2017, then Secretary Tillerson [redesignated](#) as CPCs, for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations, the 10 countries previously designated as such in October 2016: Burma,

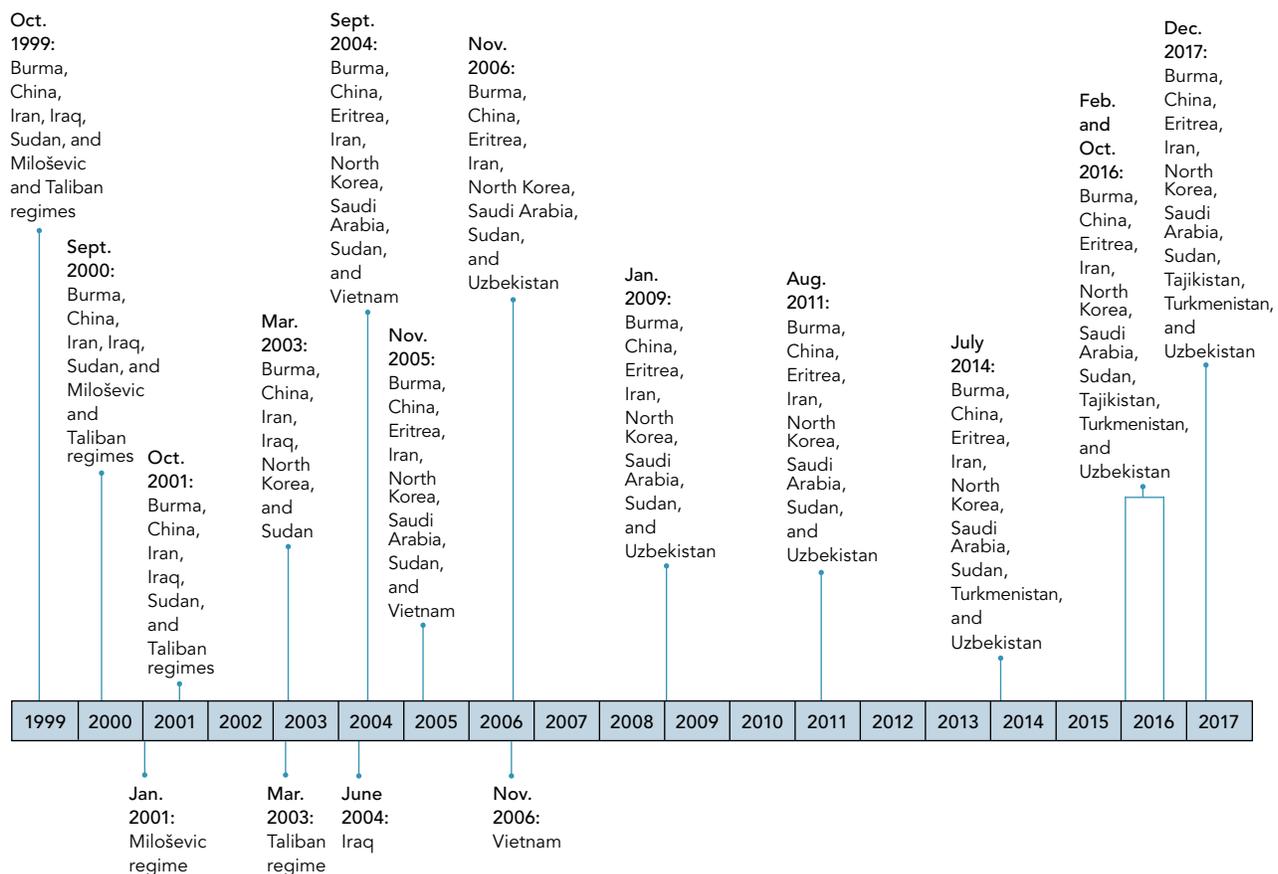
China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF [welcomed](#) these designations and urged that the six other countries USCIRF had recommended as CPCs in the 2017 annual report also be designated. The December 2017 designations were the State Department’s 13th set of CPC designations over IRFA’s existence, and most of the countries had been named for a decade or more. The most recent addition to the State Department’s CPC list was Tajikistan, which was added for the first time in February 2016.

On the same date as the 2017 CPC designations, then Secretary Tillerson also designated Pakistan as the first—and only—country on the department’s Special Watch List, the Frank Wolf Act’s new category for countries that engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, a level of violations below the CPC threshold but that neither IRFA nor the Frank Wolf Act define more explicitly.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make its CPC and Special Watch List designations annually, not later than 90 days after the issuance of the IRF Report. The IRF Report covering 2016, on which these designations were based, was issued on August 15, 2017, meaning that the CPC and Special Watch List designations should have been made by November 13.

The December 2017 CPC designations continued the same presidential actions as the 2016 designations, which are shown in the table below. Of the 10 CPC designees, six are subject to preexisting, or “double-hatted,” sanctions, and four have waivers. Successive administrations have relied on such an approach, and while the statute permits it, USCIRF has long expressed concern that using preexisting sanctions or indefinite waivers provides little incentive for CPC-designated governments to reduce or halt egregious religious freedom violations.

STATE’S DESIGNATIONS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES AS CPCs



STATE’S REMOVALS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES FROM CPC LIST

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information, updated by USCIRF

PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS FOR 2017 CPC DESIGNATIONS (AS DESCRIBED IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER)

For Burma, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For China, the existing ongoing restriction on exports to China of crime control and detection instruments and equipment, under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (P.L. 101-246), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Eritrea, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Iran, the existing ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For North Korea, the existing ongoing restrictions to which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Saudi Arabia, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Sudan, the restriction in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the government of Sudan, currently set forth in section 7042(j) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2015 (Div. K, P.L. 114-113), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Tajikistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Turkmenistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Uzbekistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to notify Congress of CPC designations not later than 90 days after they are made. The State Department [did so](#) for the December 22, 2017, designations on January 3, 2018. Also pursuant to the Frank Wolf Act, the notification letter included justifications for the waivers on taking action against Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. For all four countries, the State Department cited "the necessity for cooperating with [these governments] on certain core U.S. national security interests, including our collective efforts to counter violent extremism and transnational terrorism," and additionally for Saudi Arabia, "on energy security for the United States." Under the Frank Wolf Act, these waivers are permitted to continue for 180 days; after that period, the law gives the

president waiver authority if the president determines and reports to Congress that the foreign government has ceased violations or that the waiver is required in the important national interest of the United States.

Individual Violators

Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, a provision added by IRFA, makes inadmissible to the United States foreign officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. To date, the provision's only publicly known use was in 2005, when then Chief Minister Narendra Modi of Gujarat State in India was excluded due to his complicity in 2002 riots in his state that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,100 to 2,000 Muslims. Because of

the confidentiality of visa decisions, there may be other, unknown uses. In recent years, the IRF Office has worked to identify noncitizens who would be inadmissible on this basis should they apply for U.S. visas.

Laws other than IRFA also provide tools to sanction individual violators. Some of these apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act (CISADA, [P.L.111-195](#)), which has been used to sanction Iranian officials for human rights violations, including eight officials USCIRF identified as egregious religious freedom violators. More broadly, the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), enacted in December 2016, allows the president to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for “extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights” against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. The president [delegated](#) these authorities to the secretaries of treasury and state on September 8, 2017. On December 21, 2017, the [State](#) and [Treasury Departments](#) announced the initial set of Global Magnitsky sanctions, including against General Maung Maung Soe, who as head of the Burmese Army’s Western Command oversaw atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. USCIRF [welcomed](#) the first use of this important new accountability tool. Also on December 21, the White House issued [Executive Order 13818](#), which authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in “serious human rights abuse,” providing an additional—and potentially even more expansive—basis for targeted sanctions.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. No designated persons lists were made public in 2017.

EPC Designations

The State Department did not make EPC designations during 2017. On March 5, 2018, after the end of the

reporting period, then Secretary Tillerson [designated](#) the following nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.”

Prisoners

During 2017, the Trump Administration prioritized seeking the release of American citizens unjustly imprisoned abroad. One of these cases, that of [Pastor Andrew Brunson](#) in Turkey, is also a high priority for USCIRF, and is part of USCIRF’s [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). President Trump, Vice President Pence, and then Secretary Tillerson pressed for Pastor Brunson’s release at the highest levels of the Turkish government, but he remained in prison at the end of 2017. USCIRF Vice Chairwomen Sandra Jolley and Kristina Arriaga met with Pastor Brunson in Kiriklar Prison in October 2017, the first nonconsular, nonfamily delegation to visit him.

Refugee and Asylum Issues

Under the USRAP, the president sets a ceiling on how many vulnerable refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year; under IRFA, religious persecution should be considered in this determination. Since 2001, the refugee admission ceiling has ranged from 70,000 to 110,000, averaging 75,000 per year. The Trump Administration suspended the USRAP for part of 2017 to put in place enhanced vetting procedures and set the ceiling for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 and FY 2018 at 50,000 and 45,000, respectively. While resettlement to a third country is only possible for less than 1 percent of the world’s refugees, USCIRF has [emphasized](#) its importance for the most vulnerable, especially at a time of appalling mass atrocities and unprecedented forced displacement.

Pursuant to IRFA’s authorization, USCIRF has conducted extensive research into the U.S. government’s treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal. USCIRF’s reports on the subject—released in [2005](#), [2007](#),

Laws other than IRFA also provide tools to sanction individual violators.

2013, and 2016—document major problems, which successive administrations have not addressed. In 2017, the Trump Administration expanded the use of Expedited Removal, which allows Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers to quickly deport, without immigration court hearings, noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documents, unless they establish a credible fear of persecution or torture. USCIRF’s monitoring of Expedited Removal over more than a decade has revealed that DHS officials often fail to follow required procedures to

identify asylum-seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations, and that they detain asylum-seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions. To ensure the fair and humane treatment of asylum-seekers while protecting U.S. borders, USCIRF has recommended that DHS (1) appoint a high-level official to coordinate refugee and asylum issues and oversee reforms, (2) improve quality assurance measures, (3) give officers additional training, (4) use non-prison-like detention facilities, and (5) increase funding for asylum officers and immigration courts to promptly and fairly adjudicate claims. USCIRF also has urged Congress to exercise oversight on these issues, including by requesting that the Government Accountability Office conduct a study to assess whether noncitizens removed to their home countries under Expedited Removal have faced persecution or torture upon their return.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL MARK

It has been my privilege for the past four years to serve on USCIRF, promoting and defending what we rightly call in this country the “first freedom.” For Americans, religious liberty is our first freedom in part because it comes first in our Bill of Rights. But, in a much deeper way, religious liberty is the first freedom because of its fundamental, foundational nature. It is noteworthy that, twenty years ago, Congress created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, not on International Human Rights. Human rights,

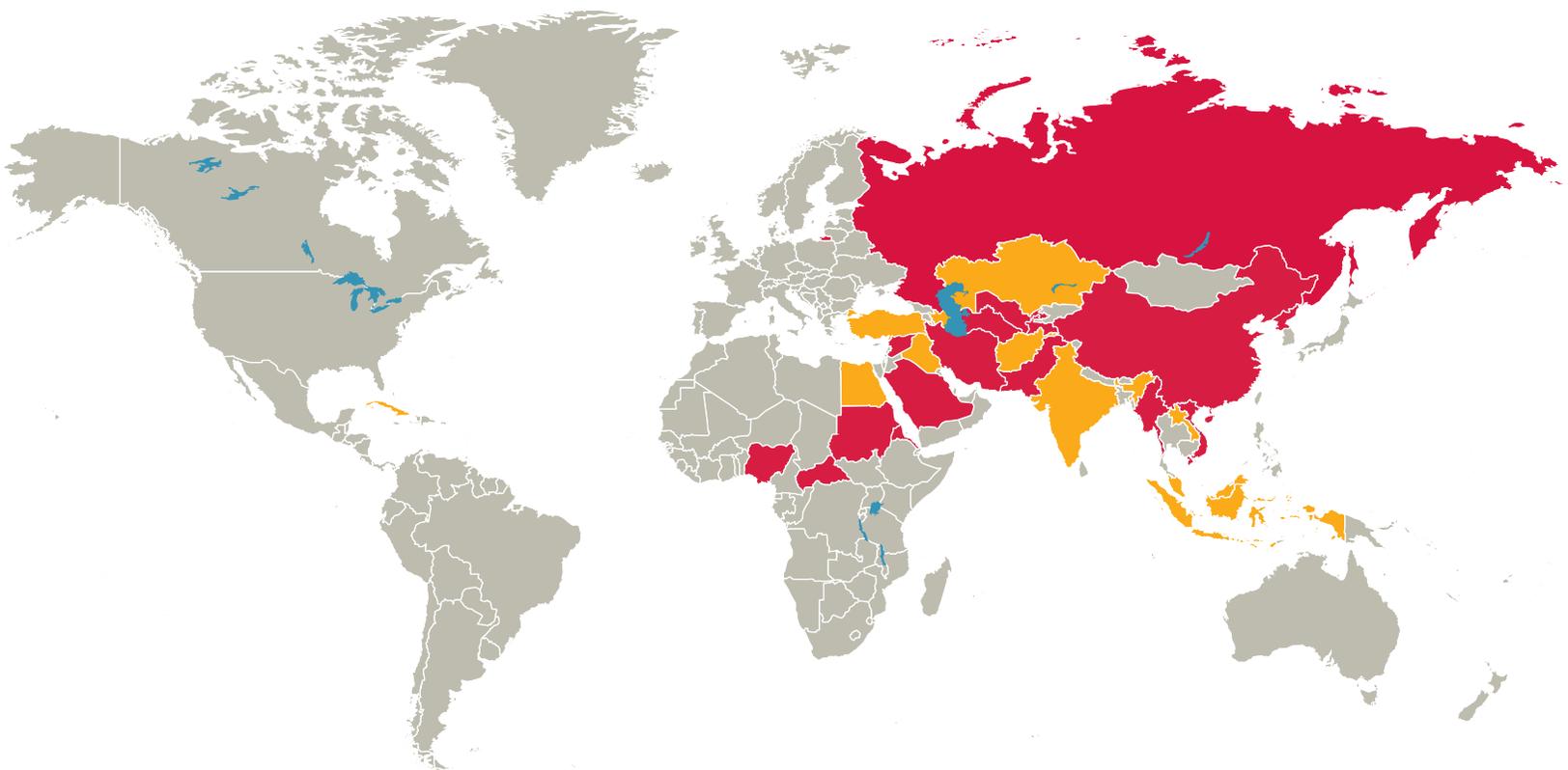
properly understood, are inalienable and inviolable, but Congress saw then—and many continue to see—that religious freedom deserves pride of place. Though profoundly intertwined with other basic rights such as freedom of expression and association, freedom of

religion stands out as the right for which people are most willing to suffer and die. This is because religious freedom safeguards the right to recognize what is most sacred and to live one’s life according to one’s sacred obligations. Moreover, religious freedom is the ultimate bulwark against totalitar-

ianism because it stands as a testament to the notion that the human being does not belong to the state and that the person’s highest commitments lie beyond the control of government. This is an especially critical lesson in our age of rising authoritarianism, and it may underpin the emerging case that religious freedom is a prerequisite for democracy, rather than the other way around. Finally, with mounting evidence that ties religious freedom tightly to peace and prosperity, we also know it is in nations’ interest to respect this paramount right. Though they resist the conclusion at every turn, regimes that wish for stability and development must accept that religious freedom is not the problem but the solution.

USCIRF’s monitoring of Expedited Removal over more than a decade has revealed that DHS officials often fail to follow required procedures to identify asylum-seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations, and that they detain asylum-seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions.

2018 COUNTRIES



■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Burma | Iran | Russia | Tajikistan |
| Central African Republic | Nigeria | Saudi Arabia | Turkmenistan |
| China | North Korea | Sudan | Uzbekistan |
| Eritrea | Pakistan | Syria | Vietnam |

■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

| | | | |
|-------------|-------|------------|----------|
| Afghanistan | Cuba | Indonesia | Laos |
| Azerbaijan | Egypt | Iraq | Malaysia |
| Bahrain | India | Kazakhstan | Turkey |

KEY FINDINGS

Of the myriad religious freedom challenges the government of Burma (also known as Myanmar) confronted in 2017, the crisis in Rakhine State was the most exigent. Military and security forces launched a brutal response to attacks carried out by Rohingya Muslim insurgents against border guard and law enforcement personnel in October 2016 and August 2017. The retaliatory acts included indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks against innocent civilians, even children: looting, burning, and destroying property; arbitrary detentions and arrests; rape and other sexual violence; enforced disappearances; and extrajudicial killings. U.S. and United Nations (UN) officials characterized the abuses as ethnic cleansing. The violence, which was also perpetrated by nonstate actors in Rakhine State, first prompted 74,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh, followed by upward of 688,000, a number that continued to grow after the reporting period. Extreme nationalist sentiment among some Buddhists continued to drive

enmity toward Muslims in Burma in 2017, and some Buddhist leaders propagated chauvinistic and racist attitudes. Decades-long discriminatory policies and practices perpetuated by successive governments and the military also continued to restrict religious freedom for religious and ethnic minorities. For example, some Christians face bureaucratic hurdles and societal pressure that make it difficult to gather in public to worship or obtain permission to build churches, and converts to Christianity experience harassment. In November 2017, a USCIRF delegation visited Burma to assess religious freedom conditions. Based on the systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom occurring in the country, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Burma merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. State Department has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Burma as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Work with bilateral and multilateral partners to put concerted pressure on Burma’s government and military to allow an independent investigation into the root causes of conflict and the human rights violations in areas like Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states, and to hold accountable perpetrators or inciters of severe violations of human rights and humanitarian laws, including specific abuses related to freedom of religion or belief;
- Retain the position of the U.S. Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office and for U.S.-Burma relations, including by:
 - Urging the government of Burma, representatives from all religious communities residing in Burma (including leaders and laypersons), and other relevant stakeholders to combat intolerance and promote inclusivity in the spirit of the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence;
 - Advising Burma’s government to draft its bill protecting against hate speech consistent with international standards and review existing laws, policies, and regulations to ensure that they combat intolerance, discrimination, and incitement to violence without restricting speech;
- Encouraging Burma’s government to become party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Work with Burma’s government in support of a credible path to citizenship for Rohingya Muslims, to ensure their freedom of movement, and to restore their political rights to vote and run for office;
- Use the term “Rohingya” both publicly and privately, which legitimizes their status and respects the right of Rohingya Muslims to identify as they choose; and
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and persons detained or awaiting trial, and press Burma’s government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

The Central African Republic (CAR) remains violent, fragile, and fractured along religious lines. In 2017, targeted killings based on religious identity escalated in the center and east of the country. Violence was reminiscent of the extensive killing and displacement of Muslims that took place in 2014; armed groups especially targeted the ethnoreligious minority Peuhl population. In early August, then United Nations (UN) Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien warned that the early signs of genocide are present in CAR. Militias that formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines killed individuals based on their religious identity and displaced tens of thousands. More than one million Central Africans were displaced as of late 2017, the highest number since 2014. CAR's Muslim population remains disproportionately displaced, with 80 percent of that community having been driven from the country. In the western part of the country,

some Muslims cannot practice their faith, move freely, or equally access services. A USCIRF delegation that traveled to CAR in May was disappointed by senior government officials' dismissive response to concerns about conditions for Muslims. Government officials failed to acknowledge that the conflict has resulted in gross violations of religious freedom, including widespread killing based on religious identity, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims, separation of communities based on religion, and the destruction of houses of worship. The CAR government has taken some steps to address interfaith tensions but needs to increase its reconciliation efforts to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and improve interfaith relations. USCIRF again finds in 2018 that CAR merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has since 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate CAR as a CPC under IRFA;
- Increase engagement with CAR authorities, the UN, and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country by:
 - Issuing statements that Muslims are full and equal citizens;
 - Undertaking development missions in the northeast;
 - Ensuring Muslim participation in government administration;
 - Safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes;
 - Recognizing Muslim holidays as national holiday; and
 - Rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Work with the UN Security Council to continue to sanction ex-Séléka and anti-balaka members responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and continue to speak out regularly against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses;
- Condition ongoing support for security sector reform on the establishment of security forces and police units that reflect the country's diversity;
- Continue to support programs to re-establish and professionalize CAR's judiciary, and fully fund the Special Criminal Court;
- Expand support for reconciliation programs and interfaith dialogue to rural areas; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, China advanced its so-called “sinicization” of religion, a far-reaching strategy to control, govern, and manipulate all aspects of faith into a socialist mold infused with “Chinese characteristics.” The strategy amplifies the Chinese government’s existing pervasive policies that, over time, have intruded into various communities. While the faithful in China are burgeoning, Xinjiang and Tibet increasingly resemble police states, further limiting freedom of religion or belief for Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, respectively, and authorities continue to crack down on unregistered and registered churches and persecute Falun Gong practitioners. In 2017, the Chinese government increasingly targeted religious individuals and organizations

believed to have foreign connections, particularly to Islam and Christianity. Throughout 2017, mounting reports revealed how Chinese authorities use torture against lawyers, human rights defenders, and other prisoners of conscience and those held in detention, often without charge, not only to intimidate, but also to force confessions and compel individuals to renounce their faith. Based on the government’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds that China merits designation in 2018 as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing export restrictions to China under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (P.L. 101-246);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Integrate religious freedom and related human rights strategies into the bilateral relationship, including in annual dialogues and in both public and private fora, and across all U.S. government agencies and entities, and devise aspects tailored to specific communities, including:
 - Appoint and confirm a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues and urge the Chinese government to resume dialogue with the Tibetan people;
 - Meet with house church leaders and advocates, both at their houses of worship and at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China;
 - Call on the Chinese government to cease equating Islam with terrorism, separatism, extremism, or other perceived threats to state security; and
 - Call on the Chinese government to cease labeling Falun Gong as a cult and lift the ban on its practice;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the Chinese government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, lawyers, and adequate medical care from independent health care professionals, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Press the Chinese government to abide by its commitments under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and also independently investigate reports of torture among individuals detained or imprisoned, including reports of organ harvesting; and
- Press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers crossing its borders, including by allowing the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees and international humanitarian organizations to assist them, and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the Convention against Torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Cosponsor and approve the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2017 ([H.R. 1872/S. 821](#));
- Send regular Congressional delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to China and request to visit areas deeply impacted by the government’s severe religious freedom abuses, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Zhejiang Province; and
- Advocate on behalf of individual prisoners of conscience and persons whom the Chinese government has detained or disappeared, as well as their family members.

KEY FINDINGS

The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom. Thousands of Eritreans are detained because of their religious beliefs or practice. Systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, forced conversions, and interference in the internal affairs of recognized religious groups. The government recognizes only four religious communities: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. All others are unregistered and treated as illegal. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities and Jehovah's Witnesses. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years. Over the past year, the Eritrean government increased its persecution of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians. Security forces arrested followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. In addition, authorities conducted door-to-door searches and arrested individuals identified as Pentecostal or Evangelical solely for their religious

identity. Since 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied Eritrean citizenship and barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, government jobs, and business licenses. The government requires indefinite national service with no alternative for conscientious objectors, and Eritreans who refuse to participate are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated. Religious practice is prohibited in the military and conscripts are severely punished if found with religious materials or participating in religious gatherings. Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned without trial since 1994 for refusing military service. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims. Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios has been held under house arrest since 2007 for opposing government interference in internal church affairs. In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Eritrea merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups;
 - Grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses;
 - Provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards;
 - Bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards;
- Bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and
- Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the [Global Magnitsky Act](#);
- Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Antonios;
- Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
- Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council; and
- Sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution denouncing Eritrea's gross religious freedom and human rights violations.

KEY FINDINGS

In the past year, religious freedom in Iran continued to deteriorate for both recognized and unrecognized religious groups, with the government targeting Baha'is and Christian converts in particular. While several high-profile Baha'i prisoners were released during the reporting period following completion of their sentences, others were arbitrarily detained based on their religion, and long-term trends of economic and educational persecution of the community continue. Christian converts and house church leaders faced increasingly harsh sentencing; many were sentenced to at least 10 years in prison for their religious activities. Religious reformers and dissenters faced prolonged detention and possible execution, while the government's growing ability to enforce official interpretations of

religion online posed new threats to the freedom and safety of internet users. In a new, troubling development, the suspension of a Zoroastrian elected to the local council of Yazd sparked national debate about limiting the political rights of religious minorities. While the Rouhani Administration signaled its intent to address some religious freedom violations, these promises have yet to be implemented and the number of individuals imprisoned for their beliefs continues to climb. Based on these particularly severe religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2018 that Iran be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Since 1999, the U.S. Department of State has designated Iran as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a CPC under IRFA;
 - Ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government whenever possible;
 - Work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions for religious freedom abuses, especially leading up to Iran's 2019 Universal Periodic Review;
 - Press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience;
 - Speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
 - Identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act \(CISADA\)](#), the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;
 - Call on Iran to cooperate fully with the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur—and other relevant UN entities, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention—to visit;
 - Maintain leadership in supporting an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights—including freedom of religion or belief—in Iran and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable; and
 - Use appropriated funds to advance internet freedom and protect Iranian activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Iran.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to pass resolutions condemning the Iranian government's repression of the religious minorities, such as the Baha'i community; and
 - Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the [Lautenberg Amendment](#), which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities and other specified groups seeking refugee status in the United States, and work to provide the president with permanent authority to designate as refugees specifically defined groups based on shared characteristics identifying them as targets for persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor in 2017. The Nigerian government at the national and state levels continued to tolerate violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and suppressed the freedom to manifest religion or belief. The federal government continued to detain the leader of the Shi'a Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, along with his wife and hundreds of other members, and state governments continued to ban the group's activities. Sectarian violence between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers increased, and the Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetra-

tors accountable. Despite gains made by the Nigerian military in the fight against Boko Haram, the government's nonmilitary efforts remained nascent, and Boko Haram's attacks continued. The government also failed to hold Nigerian Army officers accountable for excessive use of force against IMN members, against Boko Haram, and in efforts to curtail sectarian violence. Finally, other religious freedom abuses continued at the state level, including coercive official or societal actions to enforce particular religious norms. Based on these violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Nigeria should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Seek to enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as authorized under section 405 (c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support, to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
 - Professionalize and train specialized police and joint security units to respond to sectarian violence and acts of terrorism, including in counterterrorism, investigative techniques, community policing, nonlethal crowd control, and conflict prevention methods;
 - Enhance training for all military and police officers on international human rights standards, and ensure security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable;
 - Conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecute incidents of sectarian violence and terrorism and suspected and/or accused perpetrators;
 - Develop effective conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria;
- Encourage politicians and religious leaders to participate in conflict management training and projects to prevent violence and counter divisive and inciting messages;
- Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter- and deradicalization programs;
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to discuss further actions to end sectarian violence, address land concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities;
- Ensure religious freedom issues are addressed in the assessments required by Congress under [section 1279A](#) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, including by:
 - Assessing the role of religious identity in human rights violations by Nigerian security forces;
 - Assessing the engagement of religious leaders by Nigerian forces in efforts to improve protection of civilians; and
 - Incorporating education and training on religious freedom issues into the plan for the U.S. government to work with Nigerian institutions to improve detainee conditions;
- Within existing U.S. assistance to Nigeria, increase funding and support for conflict prevention and management programming in central and northern states facing high levels of sectarian violence, and for research into the relationship between corruption and religious freedom violations in Nigeria; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act.

NORTH KOREA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

The North Korean government's approach toward religion and belief is among the most hostile and repressive in the world. Freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. The regime exerts absolute influence over the handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist, creating a facade of religious life in North Korea. In practice, the North Korean regime treats religion as a threat, particularly faiths associated with the West, such as Christianity, and is known to arrest, torture, imprison, and even execute religious believers. Although it is challenging to obtain information about violations of religious freedom occurring in North Korea, defector accounts and the work of advocacy

and nongovernmental organizations increasingly reveal the regime's abuses and reinforce the international community's entreaties for accountability. In the meantime, throughout 2017 the North Korean government perpetuated its long-standing record of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, and USCIRF again finds that North Korea, also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), merits designation in 2018 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State repeatedly has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing trade restrictions pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act, and other executive, congressional, or United Nations (UN) action;
- Identify and target—with sanctions or other tools—individuals or companies outside North Korea who work directly with North Korean human rights violators or benefit from these abuses;
- Call for a follow-up UN inquiry to track the findings of the [2014 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea \(COI\)](#) and assess any new developments—particularly with respect to violations of the freedom of religion or belief—and suggest a regularization of such analysis similar to and in coordination with the Universal Periodic Review process;
- Maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time position at the State Department and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in official and unofficial discussions about or with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization and security, as appropriate;
- Strengthen cooperation with regional partners, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns, including specific religious freedom issues, and press for improvements, including the release of prisoners of conscience and closure of the infamous political prisoner camps and other detention facilities;
- Expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and facilitation of improved internet access so North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information; and
- Encourage Chinese support for addressing the most egregious human rights violations in North Korea, including violations of religious freedom, and regularly raise with the government of China the need to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum-seekers in China, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and international humanitarian organizations to assist them, and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the UN Convention against Torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Cosponsor and reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2017 ([H.R. 2061/S. 1118](#)) and incorporate updated language and/or recommendations from the 2014 COI report, particularly regarding freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious minorities in Pakistan, including Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and Shi'a Muslims, continued to face attacks and discrimination from extremist groups and society at large. The government of Pakistan failed to protect these groups adequately, and it perpetrated systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations. Various media outlets promoted intolerance against religious minorities. Abusive enforcement of the country's strict blasphemy laws resulted in the suppression of rights for non-Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadis. Forced conversions of non-Muslims continued despite the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act, which grants greater rights in family law for Hindu citizens. The entry of fundamentalist, and often extremist, religious parties into the political arena in advance of July

2018 national elections further threatens religious minorities' already precarious status in the country. In May 2017, a USCIRF delegation visited Islamabad and met with Pakistani government officials, U.S. Embassy officials, representatives of civil society, and religious minority community leaders. Based on these violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Pakistan should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2002. Despite USCIRF's longstanding recommendation, the State Department has never so designated Pakistan. In December 2017, the State Department named Pakistan as the first, and only, country on its "Special Watch List," a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Pakistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks including major legal reforms and releasing blasphemy prisoners, and accompany such an agreement with U.S.-provided resources for related capacity building through the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID);
- Ensure a portion of existing State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor programs are geared to helping the government implement plans to ensure the physical security of religious minority communities, and to countering the extremist rhetoric that underlies their discriminatory treatment;
- Enhance support from the State Department and other relevant federal or federally funded organizations for non governmental groups engaging in conflict resolution and peace training for religious leaders and administrators of madrasa administration boards;
- Encourage the government of Pakistan to launch a public information campaign about the historic role of religious minorities in the country, their contributions to society, and their equal rights and protections, and use the tools of U.S. public diplomacy, such as educational and cultural exchanges and U.S.-funded media, to highlight similar themes;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act; and
- Prioritize religious freedom issues in the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship, and work with international organizations and representatives like the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief outside the EU to jointly raise religious freedom concerns with Pakistani officials in Islamabad and in multilateral settings, including by:
 - Emphasizing to Pakistan's prime minister and military leadership the link between religious freedom and overall security in the country;
- Pressing the government of Pakistan to implement the two dozen religious freedom recommendations it accepted from its 2017 Universal Periodic Review by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, of which Pakistan is a member;
- Urging the government of Pakistan to repeal its blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws, until repeal can be accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, and allow investigatory authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and also urging the enforcement of existing penal code articles that criminalize perjury and false accusations; and
- Encouraging the government of Pakistan to enhance the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony's role in fostering interfaith dialogue and empowering religious minority groups and to provide security and facilitate meetings between leaders and scholars from various religions and from the various Islamic sects.

KEY FINDINGS

During 2017, Russia showed no signs of wavering from the repressive behavior it demonstrated in 2016 that led USCIRF to recommend its designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for the first time in April 2017. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists, with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Most notably, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned outright, as was their translation of the Bible, and their followers persecuted nationwide. Adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat, members of the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, and readers of the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were sentenced to prison terms of between three and 18 years for peaceful religious expression. In the North Caucasus, security forces

acted with total impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamic militancy. Russia is the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom since USCIRF commenced monitoring it, but also expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state by means of military invasion. A visit by USCIRF to Ukraine in December 2017 confirmed that in Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian authorities continued to kidnap, torture, and imprison Crimean Tatar Muslims at will, while Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, often referred to as the Donbas, continued to hold expropriated church buildings and intimidate religious communities. Based on these particularly severe violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Russia merits designation as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA;
- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Russian government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence;
- Press the Russian government to ensure that laws such as the extremism, religion, and foreign agents laws are not used to limit the religious activities of peaceful religious groups, and to implement European Court of Human Rights decisions relating to freedom of belief;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Raise concerns on freedom of religion or belief in multilateral settings and meetings, including at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and urge the Russian government to agree to visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the OSCE Representatives on Tolerance, and to establish an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience, and press the Russian government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists, and that the ambassador meets with representatives of religious minorities;
- Encourage increased U.S. funding for Voice of America (VOA) Russian and Ukrainian Services and for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Russian and Ukrainian Services, so that uncensored information about events inside Russia, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated;
- Call on the Russian government to stop persecuting religious minorities in the occupied areas of Crimea and Donbas, beginning by reversing the ban on the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and abolishing repressive religious registration requirements; and
- Include violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights in all relevant discussions with the Russian government over Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and support of rebels in the Donbas, and work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions.

SAUDI ARABIA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the Saudi government continued implementing economic and social reforms from the Vision 2030 plan, including many that may improve human rights and religious freedom conditions. Despite the easing of some social restrictions, religious freedom conditions did not improve in 2017. The government maintained its ban on non-Muslim public religious observance and continued to prosecute individuals for dissent, blasphemy, and apostasy. Saudi Arabia's new counterterrorism law did not address its vague definition of terrorism, and nonviolent offenders convicted on charges of "advocating atheism" continued to serve lengthy prison terms. While the government responded strongly to past attacks on Shi'a sites, the Shi'a community experienced ongoing discrimination and was especially targeted by a May 2017 security operation in Awamiya. After over 15 years of slow progress, the Saudi government has not completed reforms

to textbooks that propagate intolerance and violence; in fact, some of the most egregious content remained in textbooks in use during the current school year. Despite some promising steps to restrict it, the guardianship system remained in force, adversely affecting the religious freedom of women. On a positive note, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other senior officials made strong statements against violent extremism. Based on particularly severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Saudi Arabia merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the U.S. State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, most recently in December 2017, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006. The waiver releases the administration from taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver;
- Fully engage the Saudi government to take concrete action toward completing reforms confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions, including removing inflammatory and intolerant content in government-issued textbooks;
- Consider inaugurating a new U.S.-Saudi bilateral strategic dialogue, which would include human rights and religious freedom among the areas of discussion;
- Encourage the Saudi government to take further action toward ending the guardianship system, make public the steps taken since a royal decree on women's access to services, and penalize actors that continue to require a guardian's permission for services covered under the decree;
- At the highest levels, press for the release of Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other prisoners of conscience, and press the Saudi government to end prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Press the Saudi government to denounce publicly the continued use around the world of older versions of Saudi textbooks and other materials that promote hatred and intolerance, and to make every attempt to retrieve previously distributed materials that contain intolerance;
- Press the Saudi government to pursue integration of Shi'a Muslim citizens into government, the judiciary, public service, and the security sector, and prioritize inclusive governance in ongoing initiatives supported by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in Saudi Arabia;
- Press the Saudi government to pass and fully implement an antidiscrimination law protecting the equal rights of all Saudi citizens and expatriate residents;
- Press the Saudi government to exclude advocating atheism and blasphemy from the new counterterrorism law, and to end the detention under this law of nonviolent actors exercising their human rights and religious freedom;
- Work with the Saudi government to codify the right of non-Muslims to private religious practice and to permit foreign clergy to enter the country openly with religious materials to carry out worship services; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R.4549](#), the Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act, which would require the secretary of state to submit annual reports on religious intolerance in Saudi educational materials.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Sudan remained poor in 2017. The government of Sudan, led by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, imposes a restrictive interpretation of Shari'ah law and applies corresponding *hudood* punishments on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. During the year, government officials continued to arrest church leaders, harass members of various Christian denominations, and destroy or confiscate church properties. Individuals affiliated with several Evangelical congregations were arrested, fined, and evicted from their homes—and one was killed—for opposing government efforts to take over their leadership and confiscate their properties. Two churches were demolished in 2017, and Christian schools were ordered

to open on Sundays following a new government directive. Individuals prosecuted under Shari'ah-based morality provisions for “public order” violations were largely from marginalized religious and ethnic communities; they typically received summary trials without legal representation, and convictions routinely resulted in lashings. Government policies and societal pressure promoted conversion to Islam. In 2018, USCIRF again finds that Sudan merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. The U.S. Department of State has designated Sudan as a CPC since 1999, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Sudan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Continue the existing presidential action restricting U.S. assistance to the government of Sudan, except for humanitarian assistance, democracy programs, assistance for specific marginalized areas, or arrangements associated with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement;
- Convey that an exchange of ambassadors must be preceded by demonstrated, concrete progress by Khartoum in ending abuses of religious freedom and related human rights;
- Press the government of Sudan to implement the Action Plan presented by the U.S. Department of State in 2015 and 2017 and to undertake the following reforms:
 - Repeal or revise all articles in the 1991 Criminal Code that violate Sudan's international commitments to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights, including repeal of the apostasy and blasphemy laws;
 - Lift government prohibitions on church construction, issue permits for the building of new churches, create a legal mechanism to provide compensation for destroyed churches and address future destructions if necessary, and cease interference in churches' internal affairs;
 - Revive and strengthen the Commission on the Rights of Non-Muslims to protect religious freedom for non-Muslims in Sudan; and
 - Hold accountable any person who engages in violations of freedom of religion or belief, including attacking houses of worship, attacking or discriminating against any person because of his or her religious affiliation, and prohibiting any person from fully exercising his or her religious freedom.
 - Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
 - Establish an official, senior-level dialogue on religious freedom and human rights with the government of Sudan
- to ensure that issues of concern are consistently raised at the highest levels;
- Maintain the position of the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan and South Sudan and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Work to ensure that Sudan's future constitution includes protections for freedom of religion or belief, respect for international commitments to human rights, and recognition of Sudan as a multireligious, multiethnic, and multicultural nation;
- Support dialogue efforts with civil society and faith-based leaders and representatives of all relevant political parties; educate relevant parties to the national dialogue about international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief; and work with opposition parties and civil society to resolve internal disputes related to freedom of religion or belief; and
- Urge the government of Sudan to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting further visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Sudan, and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious freedom conditions, as well as human rights, remained dire in Syria. For most of the year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued to carry out mass executions, attack civilian populations, and kidnap religious minorities. By year's end, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS largely had defeated the group in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The Syrian government continued to target and depopulate Sunni Muslim-dominated areas. The year also saw a massive spike in the involvement of the Syrian Local Defense Forces (LDF)—militias backed and funded by Iran and integrated into the Syrian Armed Forces—in sectarian violence targeting Sunni Muslims. Allies of the Syrian regime, including foreign Shi'a fighters recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, also carried out sectarian attacks. Areas held by the armed opposition continued to

vary in levels of restriction of religious freedom. In northeastern Syria, Christians living in the Kurdish-held Autonomous Administration complained of increased interference in private Christian schools and confiscation of property. Armed Islamist opposition groups in northern Syria, including the al-Qaeda affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), attacked Shi'a pilgrims and harassed those opposed to their strict Islamic rules. Due to the collective actions of the Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Syria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2014. USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2017, ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Designate ISIS as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, for its control of territory and conduct in 2017;
- Condemn the Assad regime's crimes against humanity and brutal persecution of Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the United Nations (UN) Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions [2118](#), [2139](#), [2165](#), [2209](#), and [2254](#);
- Continue to support international efforts to investigate and collect evidence of gross human rights abuses during the conflict, including the UN Human Rights Council-mandated [Independent International Commission of Inquiry \(COI\)](#) and the UN General Assembly-mandated [International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria \(IIIM\)](#);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the [Global Magnitsky Act](#);
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria; and
- Continue the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting—with priority being given to victims of ISIS and vulnerable religious minority communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass H.R. 390, the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017; S. 1158, the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017; and S. 905, the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act, to help prevent, mitigate, and respond to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Syria; and
- Pass H.R. 4238, the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes terrorism-related sanctions on two Iranian-controlled militias, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, that have carried out sectarian crimes in Syria.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, amid a tightening of control over Tajikistan by President Emomali Rakhmon and his family, the Tajik government continued to suppress displays of public religiosity as well as persecute minority communities. Persons sentenced to prison included alleged Salafists, a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector, and a Protestant pastor. Authorities pursued a crackdown on various attributes of faith, going so far as to impose restrictions on wedding and funerary banquets and requiring a license to grow a beard. Higher Islamic religious education was all but throttled and attempts were made to curb participation in Ramadan observance. Symbolizing its monopoly of

the political space, the government continued to torment an imprisoned lawyer who represented members of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), as well as family members of the lawyer and of other IRPT members; the party's legal existence was part of the country's post-civil war peace treaty. Based on these concerns, as it has since 2012, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Tajikistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. State Department designated Tajikistan as a CPC for the first time in February 2016 and did so again most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking an action as a consequence of the CPC designation and negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Tajikistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reform, an end to police raids, prisoner releases, and greater access to foreign coreligionists; should an agreement not be reached, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Condition U.S. assistance to the Tajik government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, on the government establishing and implementing a timetable of specific steps to reform the 2009 religion law and improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Work with the international community, particularly during Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) events on countering terrorism, to include private and public criticism of Tajikistan's approach to regulating religion and countering extremism, which risks radicalizing the country's population;
- Urge the Tajik government to permit visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, the independence of the judiciary, and torture; set specific visit dates; and provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Tajik government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Ozodi so that uncensored information about events inside Tajikistan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated; and
- Ensure that INTERPOL implements announced reforms to more effectively process complaints about the misuse of international arrest and extradition requests, known as "red notices," to pursue political and religious dissidents.

TURKMENISTAN

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

Turkmenistan is widely considered the most closed of the former Soviet states, and this is reflected in the government's severe repression of religious freedom, which continued unabated in 2017. The government is deeply suspicious of all independent religious activity and maintains a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmen law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. Police raids, fines, and detentions of registered and unregistered religious groups continued in 2017. Persons accused of "criminal" religious offenses may be tried in "closed-regime" courts in which even the sentence meted out remains secret. Many of those convicted then "disappear" in the Turkmen

prison system and are presumed to be held without any contact with the outside world in the notorious desert prison of Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners regularly die from torture and starvation. However, the full extent of religious persecution is unknown due to the almost complete absence of independent news media in Turkmenistan and the threat of retaliation by the government against communities, family members, and individuals who publicize human rights violations. In light of these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Turkmenistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC since 2014, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking an action as a consequence of the CPC designation and negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Turkmenistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reform, an end to police raids, prisoner releases, and greater access to foreign coreligionists; should an agreement not be reached, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Urge the Turkmen government to desist immediately from the practice of "disappearing" prisoners and account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds;
- Urge the Turkmen government to close the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, where many religious prisoners of conscience are held;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the Turkmen government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, international human rights monitors, adequate medical care, lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, continues to maintain appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Encourage Turkmenistan to resume the yearly Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with the United States, which have not been held since 2015;
- Urge the Turkmen government to agree to a visit by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, as well as visits from the Special Rapporteurs on independence of the judiciary and on torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for their visits;
- Raise concerns about Turkmenistan's record on religious freedom and related human rights in bilateral meetings, such as the ABCs, as well as appropriate international fora, including the UN and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE);
- Encourage the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and the OSCE Presence, both based in Ashgabat, to enhance their activities relating to human rights, including freedom of religion or belief; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), so that uncensored information about events inside Turkmenistan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, hope was widespread in Uzbekistan that the stated reformist course of newly elected President Shavkat Mirziyoyev would lead to a relaxation in the repression of religious freedom. A USCIRF delegation that visited the country in 2017 was encouraged by changes in religious policies that would have been unthinkable under the previous administration, including prisoner releases and the easing of some of the restrictions on the practice of Islam. However, the Uzbek government has not yet embarked on a major deviation from its overall policy of severe restriction of religious freedom, premised on the threat posed by Islamic extremism. In addition, an unknown number of Muslim religious prisoners—often estimated at over 10,000—continue to serve lengthy sentences in harsh conditions on dubious charges. Also, during

the year, Christian minorities experienced constant harassment in the form of raids, literature confiscations, short-term detention, and torture. The most accurate picture of religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan remains uncertain and incomplete due to intense government surveillance, intimidation, and fear of reprisals among religious believers for speaking out. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing violations, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Uzbekistan merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the U.S. State Department has designated Uzbekistan as a CPC since 2006, most recently in December 2017, it has indefinitely waived taking any action as a consequence of the designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Uzbekistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking any action as a consequence of the CPC designation, in place since January 2009, and work to establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail or Uzbekistan not uphold its commitments, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Urge the Uzbek government to close the notorious Jasliq Prison, where many religious prisoners of conscience are held;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Uzbek government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Make the return of corruption-linked funds seized by the United States under the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative dependent on the Uzbek government’s adoption of specific actions to improve religious freedom conditions and comply with international human rights standards;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Urge the Uzbek government to bring its laws into conformity with international human rights standards, including removing registration requirements on religious communities, permitting the distribution and possession of peaceful religious literature, and permitting the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Ozodlik and the Uzbek service of the Voice of America so that uncensored information about events inside Uzbekistan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated; and
- Ensure that INTERPOL implements announced reforms to more effectively process complaints about the misuse of international arrest and extradition requests, known as “red notices,” to pursue political and religious dissidents.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, Vietnam hosted world leaders for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, but instead of using the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to a rules-based international order, the government amplified human rights abuses, including against freedom of religion or belief. The government's crackdown on religion, expression, association, and assembly was nationwide, suggesting a concerted effort to silence critics and peaceful activists while the world was watching. Vietnam intensified its harassment, arrests, imprisonments, and torture of peaceful activists, dissidents, and bloggers, including persons of faith targeted by the government and nonstate actors for their religious practice or religious freedom advocacy. These developments do not bode

well for the implementation of Vietnam's new Law on Belief and Religion, effective January 1, 2018, which includes mandatory government approvals, increased government control, and new punishments for violators. The Vietnamese government's previous willingness to engage international actors, including the United States, on religious freedom and related human rights is significantly marred by its relentless targeting of religious individuals and organizations throughout 2017. Based on these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds that Vietnam merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 2018, as it has every year since 2002.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a CPC under IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement with the Vietnamese government, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster critical reforms to improve religious freedom;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Monitor the government of Vietnam's implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion to ensure that religious organizations—particularly those that are unregistered and/or unrecognized—are able to worship freely and conduct religious activities, and that government or nonstate actors do not threaten, physically assault, detain, or imprison them for the peaceful practice of their faith;
- Encourage the government of Vietnam to acknowledge and address violations against religious communities by state and nonstate actors, including individuals sponsored by the government to carry out such extrajudicial acts, and support the training of local government officials, lawyers, judges, and police and security forces who implement, enforce, and interpret the rule of law;
- Urge the Vietnamese government to cease detaining and imprisoning members of religious organizations, as well as human rights activists, for peaceful religious activity or advocacy or for their religious affiliations, and to promptly and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience;
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City to advocate on behalf of prisoners of conscience and call for their immediate and unconditional release; maintain appropriate contact, including in-person visits, with Vietnamese prisoners of conscience; and press the government of Vietnam to ensure them regular access to their families, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and proper legal representation, as specified in international human rights instruments; and
- Assist Vietnamese civil society organizations, including through funding, as appropriate, to strengthen their skills and connect them with like-minded domestic and international partners, and also work to demonstrate to the Vietnamese government the value in allowing civil society to engage in the public square.

AFGHANISTAN

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

The security situation in Afghanistan remains unsettled, which negatively impacts religious freedom throughout the country. Despite a rise in socioeconomic status for Shi'a Muslims in recent years, attacks against this community—especially by the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP)—continued during 2017, and in some cases worsened. In addition, religious leaders involved in efforts to fight extremism and bridge the gap between various Muslim groups were murdered by extremists at a higher frequency in 2017 than in previous years. Non-Muslim groups like Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs remain endangered minorities and lack the ability to publicly take part in their religious traditions. Aspects of the country's constitution and other laws are contrary to international standards for free-

dom of religion or belief. Challenges facing the nation's women also continued, especially in relation to forced marriage and access to education and equal employment. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Afghanistan on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF also finds that the Taliban continued to commit particularly severe religious freedom violations in 2017, and therefore again recommends in 2018 that the group merits designation as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, under December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate the Taliban as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016;
- Emphasize to Afghanistan's president and chief executive the relationship between religious freedom and overall security in the country;
- Encourage the Afghan Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information and Culture to publicly promote freedom of religion or belief through public education and by creating a civic space for the open discussion of diverse opinions on matters of religion and society in the country;
- Facilitate cooperation between Afghanistan's Ministry of Women's Affairs and the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues to assist women in accessing education and employment while also addressing through legislation the practice of forced marriage;
- Urge the Afghan government through cooperation between the U.S. Embassy, leading parliamentarians, the Ministry of Law, and the Directorate on Fatwa and Accounts in the Supreme Court to:
 - Revoke the 2004 media law prohibiting "un-Islamic" writings; and
 - Overturn through appropriate legislation the 2007 decision by the Supreme Court that the Baha'i faith is blasphemous and converts to it are apostates;
- Encourage the Afghan government to enhance the Ministry on Hajj and Religious Affairs' role in fostering interfaith dialogue and empowering religious minority groups;
- Advocate for the Ministries of Interior, Defense, and Hajj and Religious Affairs to work collectively to provide security for and facilitate cooperative meetings between faith leaders and scholars from various religions and from the various Muslim communities that exist in Afghanistan;
- Ensure the integration of religious freedom concerns with related issues such as countering religious extremism and resolving sectarian conflict into State Department and Defense Department strategies and policies concerning Afghanistan; and
- Ensure that human rights concerns, including freedom of religion or belief, are integrated into all bilateral or multilateral talks seeking peace and reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

AZERBAIJAN

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

The government of Azerbaijan maintained its largely uncompromising stance on religious freedom in 2017. It tightly controls religious activities through a religion law and various articles of the administrative and criminal codes. Penalties range from fines to imprisonment. Police harassment of Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some Muslim groups in the form of raids and fines continued unchecked during the year. Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were punished for violating various restrictions, including those on religious literature and gathering for prayer. Muslim religious leaders who did not conform to state-dictated rules of observance were warned, fined, or detained, and, in one case, a mosque was demolished. Azerbaijani authorities often cite the threat of subversion from neighboring Iran as a justification for arresting Shi'a clerics and activists. In such cases, it is difficult to know the true extent of Iranian infiltration in Azerbaijan and to what extent certain individuals and groups are targeted by the government for their political activities as opposed to

their religious beliefs. In December 2017, in the continuation of a series of trials that began in 2016, 12 members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) were sentenced to prison terms of between 12 and 17 years on numerous charges, including terrorism. Whether MUM is a religious entity or a political movement or both is unclear. In January 2017, 18 activists from the same group received prison terms of between 10 and 20 years. Two separate lists maintained by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) contend that roughly two-thirds of the approximately 160 Azerbaijani prisoners of conscience are imprisoned on religious grounds. In 2017, several prisoners reported being tortured by their jailers. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Azerbaijan on its Tier 2, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Azerbaijani government to reform its religion law to bring it into conformity with recommendations by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2012;
- Work with the highest levels of the Azerbaijani government to secure the release of prisoners of conscience and ensure detainee access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, legal counsel, and religious accommodations;
- Continue the maintenance of contact, including at the ambassadorial level, between the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan and human rights and religious freedom activists;
- Urge the Azerbaijani government to agree to visits by the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on independence of the judiciary, and on torture; set specific visit dates; and provide the necessary conditions for such visits;
- Encourage the Azerbaijani government to arrange and enable visits by the three OSCE Personal Representatives on Tolerance.
- Press the government of Azerbaijan to allow religious groups to operate freely, including amending the religion law's strict registration requirements;
- Specify freedom of religion or belief as a grants category and area of activity for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, and encourage the National Endowment for Democracy to make grants for civil society programs on tolerance and freedom of religion or belief; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azadliq, the Azerbaijani Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the Azeri Service of the Voice of America, so that uncensored information about events inside Azerbaijan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the Bahraini government made a concerted effort to promote religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and peaceful coexistence, including by King Hamad bin Al Khalifa issuing the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration and announcing the establishment of the King Hamad Global Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence. In addition, non-Muslim religious communities continued to be able to freely practice their faith, both publicly and privately. Nevertheless, religious freedom conditions did not improve for the majority Shi'a Muslim community amid an ongoing stifling of dissent and a deterioration of human rights conditions generally. While Shi'a religious leaders were not targeted in 2017 as they had been during the summer of 2016, a significant crackdown in May 2017 resulted in the deaths of five Shi'a Muslim demonstrators, injuries to dozens, and the arrests and detentions of civilians and religious leaders. In addition, during the year, authorities continued to deny some

Shi'a clerics access to specific mosques and banned others from conducting Friday prayers, sermons, and other religious services. Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in government employment and some public and social services continued. Also, during the reporting period, Iranian government support for subversive activity by Shi'a militant groups in Bahrain increased. In 2017, the government made some progress in redressing past abuses against Shi'a Muslims but backtracked on other recommendations it had made progress on from the 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). As a consequence of developments in 2017, in 2018 USCIRF—for the second year in a row—places Bahrain on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Encourage the Bahraini government to address religious freedom concerns both privately and publicly, and report openly on the government's success or failure to implement genuine reforms, including by making public an annual assessment of Bahrain's progress, or lack thereof, on implementing BICI recommendations;
- Urge the Bahraini government to continue to make progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, including those related to freedom of religion and belief, sectarian incitement, and accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a community;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the country's government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Ensure clear and consistent messaging at all levels of the U.S. government regarding Bahrain's human rights and religious freedom obligations under international law;
- Increase support for rule of law, community policing, and countering violent extremism programs;
- Assist in the training of government entities, including security officials, prosecutors, and judges, to better address sectarian violence and incitement through practices consistent with international human rights standards;
- Include Bahraini civil society and religious leaders in exchange and U.S. visitor programs that promote religious tolerance, interreligious understanding, and interfaith dialogue;
- Urge the Bahraini government to pass a law in the Shura Council addressing incitement to violence in the media, ensuring compliance with international human rights standards; and
- Urge the Bahraini government to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting visits from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

During the reporting period, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained poor. The Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns that included detentions and repeated interrogations targeting religious leaders and activists who advocate for religious freedom. Officials threatened to confiscate numerous churches and interrogated religious leaders countrywide about the legal status of their religious properties. The government continues to interfere in religious groups' internal affairs and actively limits, controls, and monitors their religious practice, access to information, and communications through a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment. While the Cuban constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, this protection is limited by other constitutional and legal provisions. At the end of the reporting period, 55 religious communities were registered; only registered religious communities are legally permitted to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad for

religious purposes. The Cuban Communist Party Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) answers only to the Party and so it has broad, largely unchecked power to control religious activity, including approving some religious ceremonies other than worship services, repair or construction of houses of worship, and importation of religious materials. Authorities prevent human rights and pro-democracy activists from participating in religious activities, sometimes using force. Almost every Sunday in 2017, the government prevented members of Ladies in White from attending Mass. In a positive development, officials verbally promised the Assemblies of God that the government would not confiscate 1,400 of their churches as it threatened to do in 2015 and 2016. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Cuba on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Publicly denounce violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Cuba;
- Press the Cuban government to:
 - Stop harassment of religious leaders;
 - End the practice of violently preventing democracy and human rights activists from attending religious services;
 - End destruction of, threats to destroy, and threats to expropriate houses of worship;
 - Lift restrictions on religious communities buying property, building or repairing houses of worship, holding religious processions, importing religious materials, and admitting religious leaders;
 - Allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally, and repeal government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property;
- Allow registered and unregistered religious groups to conduct religious education;
- Cease interference with religious activities and religious communities' internal affairs; and
- Hold accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of religious practitioners, including the religious freedom of political prisoners;
- Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to travel to, exchange aid and materials with, and interact with coreligionists in the United States;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including considering responsible officials from the ORA for such measures;
- Use appropriated funds to advance internet freedom and widespread access to mass media, and protect Cuban activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Cuba, as informed by the findings and recommendations of the [Cuba Internet Task Force](#) created pursuant to the National Security Presidential Memorandum, "[Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba](#)"; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocs, to ensure violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with Cuba.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, despite a deteriorating human rights situation overall, including arrests of political dissidents and journalists, religious freedom conditions in Egypt largely remained the same as in 2016. President Abdelفتاح al-Sisi continued his overtures to promote religious tolerance, including attending Coptic Christmas Eve Mass for the fourth consecutive year. The government also continued its education curriculum reform process and planned to revamp the entire education system. The Egyptian government prioritized the construction and reconstruction of several prominent non-Muslim houses of worship, including St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo and the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, but as of early 2018, only 53 out of the 5,540 churches that applied had received approvals for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law. Despite positive developments, the number of blasphemy cases filed against individuals increased

in 2017 from 2016. In addition, human rights groups reported more than 120 sectarian attacks, including mob attacks against Christians and churches, and the lack of effective prosecution of perpetrators remained a serious concern. A series of attacks in 2017 by affiliates of the terrorist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targeted houses of worship, including Egypt's deadliest attack on a Sufi mosque, in Sinai, that resulted in the deaths of 305 people, and bombings and attacks against churches and Christians that resulted in almost 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. The Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness communities also remained unrecognized. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Egypt on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Egyptian government to accelerate approvals for the churches that have applied for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law;
- Ensure that a portion of U.S. military assistance is used to help police implement an effective plan for dedicated protection for religious minority communities and their places of worship;
- Press the Egyptian government to undertake further reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including: repealing decrees banning the Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution to create an independent antidiscrimination body;
- Urge the Egyptian government to repeal or revise article 98(f) of the penal code, which criminalizes contempt of religion, or blasphemy, and in the interim provide the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating article 98(f);
- Press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence through the judicial system and to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not under the jurisdiction of the domestic security agency, which should only deal with national security matters such as cases involving the use or advocacy of violence;
- Press the Egyptian government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims, including by prosecuting clerics who incite violence against Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities;
- Press the Egyptian government to continue to revise all textbooks and other educational materials to remove any language or images that promote intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on religion or belief, and include the concepts of tolerance and respect for the human rights of all individuals, including religious freedom, in all school curricula, textbooks, and teacher training;
- Provide support for education reform and teacher training initiatives;
- Provide support to human rights and other civil society or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to advance freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians;
- Place particular emphasis, in its annual reporting to Congress on human rights and religious freedom, on the Egyptian government's progress on the protection of religious minorities and the prosecution of perpetrators of sectarian violence; and
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious freedom conditions continued a downward trend in India. India's history as a multicultural and multireligious society remained threatened by an increasingly exclusionary conception of national identity based on religion. During the year, Hindu-nationalist groups sought to "Saffronize" India through violence, intimidation, and harassment against non-Hindus and Hindu Dalits. Both public and private actors pursued this effort. Approximately one-third of state governments enforced anti-conversion and/or anti-cow slaughter laws against non-Hindus, and mobs engaged in violence against Muslims or Dalits whose families have been engaged in the dairy, leather, or beef trades for generations, and against Christians for proselytizing. "Cow protection" lynch mobs killed at least 10 victims in 2017. Forced conversions of non-Hindus to Hinduism through "homecoming" ceremonies (*ghar wapsi*) were reported, and rules on the registration of foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were used discriminatorily against religious minority groups. The worsening conditions for religious freedom largely impacted 10 states (Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Odisha, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan); the 19 remaining states remained relatively open

and free for religious minorities. At the federal level, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made statements decrying mob violence, but members of his own political party have affiliations with Hindu extremist groups and many have used discriminatory language about religious minorities. Despite Indian government statistics indicating that communal violence has increased sharply over the past two years, the Modi Administration has not addressed the problem. His administration also has done little to provide justice for victims of large-scale past incidents of communal violence, often caused by inflammatory speeches delivered by leaders of Modi's party. While serious capacity and other challenges hamper Indian institutions' ability to address these and other problems, the active and independent judiciary exemplified by India's Supreme Court, the Ministry of Minority Affairs, and the National Commission for Minorities provide opportunities for the government to protect minorities and counter intolerance. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places India on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Integrate concern for religious freedom into bilateral discussions with India, including the framework of future Strategic Dialogues, at both the federal and state levels;
- Press the Indian government to allow USCIRF to visit the country and to invite the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit India;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Increase the U.S. Embassy's attention to issues of religious freedom and related human rights, including through visits to areas where religiously motivated violence has occurred and meetings with religious communities, local governmental leaders, and police;
- Advocate for the central Indian government to press states with anti-conversion and anti-cow slaughter laws to repeal or amend them to conform with international human rights standards; and
- Work with the Modi Administration to create a multiyear strategy to deal with hate crimes targeting religious minorities, including by:
 - Supporting the Ministries of Home Affairs and Law and Justice to strengthen the training and capacity of state and central police to prevent and punish cases of religious violence, while also protecting victims and witnesses;
- Assisting the Ministry of Law and Justice to work with state prosecutors to increase the rate of prosecutions for hate crimes targeting religious minorities; and
- Pressing state governments to prosecute religious leaders, government officials, and media personalities who incite violence against religious minority groups through public speeches or articles, as was recommended by the National Minorities Ministry in July 2014; and
- Urge the Indian government to promote interfaith dialogue and harmony, including by empowering the National Commission for Minorities and the Ministry of Minority Affairs to expand the scope of their work to include interfaith dialogue and assisting victims of mass communal violence.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, a high-profile gubernatorial election in Jakarta and a related blasphemy conviction of the capital city's then governor underscored the risk in manipulating religion for political gain. Much of this troubling trajectory was driven by the words and actions of hardliner and other intolerant groups, who in 2017 continued to use religion to advance their agenda. Although not mainstream, these individuals and groups were able to influence political and societal debate and to commit acts of discrimination and violence, often in the name of religion, with near impunity. Certain parts of the country are more restrictive and more hostile toward religious minorities than others; this includes Aceh, West Java, and South Sulawesi. And certain religious communities were targeted more than others,

such as Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, and nonbelievers. Indonesia's central government at times responded in a manner that supports religious freedom and related human rights, but provincial and local governments, as well as law enforcement, regularly exacerbated divisions and failed to prevent religious-based discrimination and violence. In 2018, USCIRF again places Indonesia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2004, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Indonesian government at the central, provincial, and local levels to comply with the Indonesian constitution and international human rights standards by:
 - Overturning the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on the Ahmadiyya community and any provincial bans on Ahmadi religious practice;
 - Repealing article 156(a) of the penal code and unconditionally releasing anyone sentenced for "deviancy," "denigrating religion," or "blasphemy"; and
 - Amending the 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship to allow religious communities the right to build and maintain their places of worship free from discrimination and threats;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Offer technical assistance and guidance to the Indonesian government as it drafts legislation protecting religious freedom, as appropriate;
- Raise in public and private with Indonesian officials the importance of investigating and prosecuting individuals or groups who discriminate or incite or perpetrate acts of violence against religious communities;
- Encourage the Ministry of Home Affairs and other relevant central government bodies to challenge local laws, regulations, and policies that run counter to Indonesia's constitution, the principles of Pancasila, and international human rights standards;
- Prioritize funding for governmental, civil society, and media programs that promote religious freedom; counter extremism; build grassroots intrafaith and interfaith coalitions; expand human rights defenders' reporting ability; train government and religious officials to mediate sectarian disputes; and enhance rule of law and build capacity for legal reform advocates, judicial officials, and parliamentarians; and
- Help to train Indonesian police and counterterrorism officials at all levels to better address sectarian conflict, religion-related violence, and terrorism, including violence against places of worship, through practices consistent with international human rights standards, ensuring those officers have not been implicated in perpetrating or tolerating past human rights abuses pursuant to Leahy Amendment vetting procedures.

KEY FINDINGS

The year 2017 concluded with the ousting from Iraqi territory of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the group that had posed the greatest existential threat to Iraq's religious minorities. Before its defeat, the group continued to launch a series of deadly attacks throughout 2017, especially in Shi'a-dominated areas, including Baghdad. In the aftermath of the liberation of areas from ISIS, particularly Sunni-dominated Mosul, human rights groups documented discrimination, torture, and reprisal killings of Sunni Muslims, many of whom were suspected of harboring ISIS sympathies. Additionally, in some locations, "ISIS family camps" were set up after many Sunni Muslims were denied the right to return to their homes. In October, following the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) independence referendum, armed conflict broke out between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) on one side, and the Kurdish Peshmerga units on the other, destabilizing an already volatile northern Iraq. This led to a change of control from the KRG to the government of Iraq in areas where significant numbers of religious minorities resided, including the

Nineveh Plains, Kirkuk, and the Sinjar Mountains. It remains to be seen whether or not such loss of territory from the KRG to the government of Iraq will be detrimental to the communities living in those areas. While the KRG has made clear overtures since 2014 to integrate religious minority communities into its governing bodies and local representation, the Iraqi government's plan on how it will integrate them effectively and ensure both their security and development remains unclear. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places the government of Iraq on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Also, USCIRF finds that, based on its control of territory and conduct during the reporting period, ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, for particularly severe religious freedom violations that occurred during this reporting period, as defined by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate ISIS as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, for its control of territory and conduct in 2017;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Encourage both the government of Iraq and the KRG to cease conflict by peacefully negotiating through territory disputes and outstanding budget and oil revenue issues, as well as protecting the rights of all Iraqis;
- Assist the government of Iraq in swiftly implementing United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2379, which includes the selection of a Special Advisor and establishment of an independent investigative team to

support domestic efforts to hold ISIS accountable for its actions in Iraq;

- Provide, in an expeditious manner, U.S. assistance to the most vulnerable communities, especially in minority areas such as predominantly Christian Nineveh Province;
- Prioritize funding for rehabilitation and stabilization for areas liberated from ISIS control to help create conditions to allow displaced communities to return, and to mitigate ethnosectarian tensions, including credible accountability and transitional justice mechanisms;
- Prioritize working with the Iraqi government to curb sectarian attacks by some elements of the PMF and armed groups that promote a sectarian agenda; and
- Stipulate in all military or security assistance to the Iraqi government and the KRG that security forces be integrated to reflect the country's religious and ethnic diversity, and provide training for recipient units on universal human

rights standards and how to treat civilians, particularly religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017, which mandates the provision of emergency relief to victims of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Iraq and Syria, and seeks to provide accountability for perpetrators of these crimes; and
- Pass [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017, which seeks to enhance U.S. government capabilities to prevent, mitigate, and respond to genocide and other atrocities.
- Pass [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes terrorism-related sanctions on two Iranian-controlled militias, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, that have carried out sectarian crimes in Syria.

KEY FINDINGS

Amid a general crackdown on dissent and nonconformity, during which even secular civil society activists have faced charges of terrorism, the Kazakh government continued to commit serious violations of religious freedom in 2017. During the year, 20 individuals were sentenced to prison terms for the peaceful expression of religious beliefs, including a Jehovah's Witness and members of the Tabligh Jamaat Islamic missionary movement. Government suspicion is aroused particularly by proselytism, connections to religious movements or institutions abroad, and criticism of or dissent from official religious policy. The country's restrictive 2011 religion law bans unregistered religious activity and is enforced through police raids, detentions, fines, and the closing of religious institutions. In December 2016, amendments to this law increased penalties and state controls of religious literature and foreign religious travel, and expanded the definitions of "missionary

activity" and "religious teaching" to penalize a broader range of expression; as of December 2017, additional amendments under consideration would further restrict religious freedom, including education for children, worshipping in private homes, and discussing religious beliefs. Throughout the year, dozens of Muslims and Christians were fined or detained for religious observance or for the possession of religious literature. In an ominous echo of practices in the neighboring countries of Russia and Uzbekistan, Kazakh authorities temporarily banned Jehovah's Witnesses and charged a religious prisoner due for release with new infractions. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Kazakhstan on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Ensure that the U.S.-Kazakh Strategic Partnership Dialogue and other bilateral interactions prioritize discussion of issues relating to freedom of religion or belief, including pressing the Kazakh government to:
 - Refrain from imposing repressive practices similar to other neighboring countries that are recommended by USCIRF for CPC designation;
 - Desist from further restrictive amendments to its laws that infringe on religious freedom and instead bring those laws in line with Kazakhstan's commitments to international human rights standards;
 - Ensure that anti-extremism and counterterrorism campaigns do not serve as a pretext for infringement on the right to peaceful religious observance and expression, in line with the recommendations of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee;
- Provide an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors; and
- Agree to visits by the three Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Personal Representatives on Tolerance, set specific dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits.
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience, and press the Kazakh government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains active contacts with religious freedom activists; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azattyq, the Kazakh service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), so that uncensored information about events inside Kazakhstan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

KEY FINDINGS

Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Laos are among the many human rights abuses occurring in the country, including government-directed or tolerated enforced disappearances and constraints on freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of the press. Throughout 2017, some religious groups were able to practice their faith freely, while others continued to experience abuses from local-level state and nonstate actors. For example, in some parts of Laos, state and nonstate actors continued to threaten, harass, attack, or arrest Christians because of their faith. The

Lao government manages religion through Decree 315, but in 2017—a year after the decree was first introduced—little information was available about its effect on religious groups, such as their ability to register, conduct activities, and recruit and train clergy. In 2018, USCIRF again places Laos on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2009, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Raise concerns about violations of freedom of religion or belief with the Lao government during the annual Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, including issues of discrimination, harassment, and violence against religious and ethnic minorities; torture and other forms of ill treatment in prisons; unlawful arrests and detentions; and the lack of due process and an independent judiciary;
- Work with the Lao government to ensure the implementation of Decree 315 is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage accountability for central, provincial, and local government officials and law enforcement acting in contravention to Laos’ laws, the Lao constitution, and international standards;
- Engage the Lao government on specific cases of religious freedom violations, including but not limited to forced evictions and/or forced renunciations of faith, and emphasize the importance of consistent implementation, enforcement, and interpretation of the rule of law by officials at all levels of government and law enforcement authorities;
- Support technical assistance programs that reinforce the goals of protecting religious freedom, human rights defenders, and ethnic minorities, including: rule of law programs and legal exchanges that focus on implementing Decree 315 consistent with international human rights standards; training for Lao police and security forces, provincial and local officials, and lawyers and judges in human rights, the rule of law, and religious freedom and tolerance; and capacity building for Lao civil society groups carrying out charitable, medical, and developmental activities;
- Ensure that Lao police and security officials participating in training or technical assistance programs are thoroughly vetted pursuant to the Leahy Amendment to confirm that they are not implicated in human rights abuses, and deny U.S. visas, assistance, or training to any unit or personnel found to have engaged in a consistent pattern of violations of human rights, including religious freedom;
- Continue to inquire consistently into the whereabouts of Sombath Somphone, especially given that the Lao government’s inability to provide any information from its investigation into his disappearance is emblematic of its overall approach to human rights, civil society, and individual rights; and
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

During 2017, in the lead-up to general elections expected in 2018, Malaysia's government and certain nonstate actors restricted expression, cracked down on critics, and used religion as a political tool. State and nonstate actors employed censorship, threats, and criminal penalties to silence dissent, and coordinated with religious authorities to influence social norms of what it means to be a good Muslim (such as dictating appropriateness in attire, food, and interactions with non-Muslims). The Malaysian government's tightening grasp—bolstered by some religious authorities who are driving a more conservative interpretation of Islam—threatened the religious freedom and related human rights of non-Muslims, non-Sunni Muslims, and atheists and other nonreligious persons, as well as Sunni Muslims who wished to practice Islam in their own way. In 2017, Malaysian lawyers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others fought back against these restrictive and

discriminatory trends to protect the country's multireligious heritage, but they faced legal ambiguity between the country's civil and Shari'ah courts and other structural roadblocks at the state and federal levels that diminish legal protections for ethnic and religious minorities, including indigenous persons. During the year, these obstacles manifested in threats against atheists, ongoing legal battles regarding the conversion of minors and the right of non-Muslims to use the word "Allah," and additional attempts to strengthen punishments under the Islamic penal code. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Malaysia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2014, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Ensure that human rights and freedom of religion or belief are pursued consistently and publicly at every level of the U.S.-Malaysia relationship, including in the Comprehensive Partnership and other discussions related to military, trade, or economic and security assistance, and in programs that address freedom of speech and expression and civil society development, among others;
- Press the Malaysian government to bring all laws and policies into conformity with international human rights standards, especially with respect to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religious expression, including the rights to use the word "Allah" and to possess religious materials;
- Encourage the Malaysian government to become party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (without reservations), and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol;
- Urge the Malaysian government to substantively amend or repeal the Sedition Act and cease the arrest, detention, and prosecution of individuals under the act, and to review other laws that limit freedom of religion or belief, opinion and expression, association and peaceful assembly, and the press;
- Urge the Malaysian government to cease the arrest, detention, or forced "rehabilitation" of individuals involved in peaceful religious activity, such as members of Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, and Al-Arqam groups, among others, and to release unconditionally those detained or imprisoned for related charges;
- Encourage the Malaysian government to establish or support independent institutions, such as the judiciary, Office of the Attorney General, and law enforcement, and to address the human rights shortcomings of the parallel civil-Shari'ah justice systems, in order to guarantee that everyone residing in Malaysia, regardless of ethnicity or religion, enjoys freedom of religion or belief; and
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the state of religious freedom in Turkey worsened. Proposed changes in the educational curriculum, an increase in government funding solely for Sunni mosques, and a lack of movement with respect to legal status and registration for non-Muslim communities have led Turkey on a downward trend. Turkey's longstanding strict secularization prevents religious communities—including Sunni Muslims—from obtaining full legal status; that being said, members of different faith groups do have their own private schools, places of worship, foundations, and media organizations. The majority of the other longstanding religious freedom concerns remain unresolved, including the return of expropriated minority properties, the delay in providing dual citizenship to Greek Orthodox Metropolitans so they can participate in the church's Holy Synod, and equal funding for religious minority community buildings from the public budget. Moreover, the continued unjust detention of Protestant Pastor Andrew Brunson since October 2016 has had a chilling effect on Christians living in the country. In recent years the government

has taken steps to return some expropriated properties to religious minority communities. The government also funded efforts to restore two historic religious minority properties, the Greek Orthodox Sumela Monastery and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, both of which are expected to open in 2018. Additionally, in 2017 the government removed the longstanding legal ban on wearing Islamic headscarves in the Turkish military and police, a move welcomed by Muslims in the country. In October 2017, a USCIRF delegation visited Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, and met with Turkish government officials and religious minority community leaders. The delegation also met with detained Pastor Brunson in Kırkları Prison, the first non-consular, non-family delegation to visit him. Based on these conditions, in 2018 USCIRF again places the government of Turkey on Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Turkish government, at the highest levels, to free Pastor Brunson from detention immediately and unconditionally;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Urge the Turkish government to ensure the education curriculum remains inclusive of all of Turkey's religious groups, and does not only include lessons and principles that are applicable to Turkey's Sunni Muslim majority;
- Urge the Turkish government to allow students to be exempted from religious courses without disclosing their religious and philosophical convictions, as mandated by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR);
- Press the Turkish government to streamline measures that would permit non-Sunni Muslim faith communities to apply for government funding to support the construction, maintenance, and upkeep of their houses of worship;
- Urge the Turkish government to fully comply with ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevis* as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedes* as religious leaders;
- Press the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic statements or other derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey;
- Press the Turkish government to fulfill private and public promises that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary would be reopened, and to permit other religious communities to open and operate their seminaries; and
- Urge the Turkish government to provide increased security to religious communities to prevent attacks on religious houses of worship.

APPENDIX 2

RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Through USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, Commissioners advocate in support of selected prisoners of conscience. With increased education, outreach, and advocacy, USCIRF hopes to raise awareness of these and other individuals being imprisoned for their religion or beliefs, reduce their number, and highlight the country conditions that led to their imprisonment.

PASTOR ANDREW BRUNSON



COUNTRY

Turkey

KEY FACT

American pastor living in Turkey for 20+ years

DETAINED SINCE

October 7, 2016

CHARGES

“support of a terrorist organization” and “political or military espionage”

POSSIBLE SENTENCE

Life in prison

USCIRF ADVOCATES

Vice Chairwoman Kristina Arriaga
Vice Chairwoman Sandra Jolley

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Brunson, 50, is an American citizen who has lived in Turkey for 23 years. He is a pastor for the Izmir Diriliş (Resurrection) Church, a small evangelical Presbyterian congregation in the city of Izmir.

Pastor Brunson filed an application to renew his residence visa in April 2016. On October 7, 2016, the local police department summoned him for what he assumed to be a routine meeting to discuss his visa renewal. However, he was taken into custody upon his arrival at the station and told he would be deported within 15 days.

A lawyer who asked to visit Pastor Brunson was denied access. When the lawyer returned with an affidavit, officials told him that he signed a statement declaring that he did not want a lawyer; the document he signed waived his right to legal representation. Initially, Turkey also refused to allow a U.S. consulate representative to meet with him, a violation of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. During this period, members of the pastor’s church attempted to bring food, water, and clothing to him, but were denied access until October 13. Pastor Brunson was not allowed contact with other prisoners and was held incommunicado in the Harmandali Detention Center.

A court document released at a December 9, 2016, hearing indicated that Pastor Brunson had been charged with “membership in an armed terrorist organization.” The judge reportedly mentioned allegations that Pastor Brunson is linked to the Gülen movement, which the Turkish government accuses of planning the failed July 2016 coup.

Pastor Brunson initially was held in a cell with 21 other inmates that was built to hold only eight prisoners. He was transferred in August 2017 to Kiriklar Prison where he was in a cell with two other men who have been

accused of being members of the Gülen movement. He spends 24 hours a day in his cell, leaving for one-hour weekly visits. Sometimes he is allowed family visits and the U.S. Embassy sees him regularly.

Anadolu, a state-run news agency, reported on August 24, 2017, that the prosecutor submitted new evidence corroborating two charges against Pastor Brunson: support of a terrorist organization and political or military espionage. On March 5, a Turkish court accepted the prosecutor’s indictment.

As of April 10, 2018, Pastor Brunson’s first court hearing is scheduled for April 16, after 18 months in government detention. Vice Chairwomen and USCIRF advocates, Kristina Arriaga and Sandra Jolley, visited Pastor Brunson on October 5, 2017, and confirmed the desperate conditions in which the Turkish authorities continue to hold Pastor Brunson.

The case against Pastor Brunson seems to be based on secret evidence and a secret witness. He has been incarcerated since October 2016 without due process and with inadequate physical and psychological support.



For more information on Turkey, see p. 43.

ABDUL SHAKOOR



COUNTRY

Pakistan

KEY FACT

80-year-old Ahmadi manager of a bookshop and optician store

DETAINED SINCE

December 2, 2015

CHARGES

Propagating the Ahmadiyya faith and stirring up “religious hatred” and “sectarianism”

SENTENCE

Three years in prison under the penal code for blasphemy and five years under the Anti-Terrorism Act on January 2, 2016

USCIRF ADVOCATES

Chairman Daniel Mark

BIOGRAPHY

Abdul Shakoor was born February 2, 1937, in Qadian, India. He is married and the father of five daughters and two sons.

Before his arrest, Mr. Shakoor was the manager of an optician’s store and bookshop in the main bazaar of Rabwah (also known as Chenab Nagar), Punjab Province, Pakistan. The population of the Ahmadiyya community in Rabwah is about 70,000—about 95 percent of the city’s total population. Many view the city as the de facto headquarters of Pakistan’s Ahmadiyya community.

On December 2, 2015, officials from the Counter Terrorism Department of the Punjab Police and Pakistan’s Elite Force raided the bookshop Mr. Shakoor managed. He was arrested along with the shop’s assistant, Mazhar Abbas—a Shia Muslim—and accused of selling an Ahmadiyya commentary on the Qur’an, among other publications. The officials confiscated Ahmadiyya publications during that raid and a later raid that took place on December 9. After their arrest, the two men were held in unknown locations and were not permitted to contact their families.

Mr. Shakoor’s trial was held in the Anti-Terrorism Court in Faisalabad, Punjab Province, with the officers who raided the bookstore as the only witnesses. The prosecution entered into evidence a letter that was ostensibly recovered during the December 9 raid from the Ahmadiyya Director of Public Affairs to Mr. Shakoor notifying him that the Punjab Province government had banned some Ahmadiyya literature and that he should neither display nor sell the banned literature. Ahmadiyya leaders assert that the prosecution fabricated the letter to support their story, noting that

none of the literature cited in the letter was banned until January 20, 2016, after the trial’s conclusion. Mr. Shakoor contended during the trial and maintains the position that he did not distribute any of the literature listed, although he admits to being in possession of some of them. However, possession of Ahmadiyya literature is not a crime in Pakistan.

On January 2, 2016, Mr. Shakoor was given a five-year prison sentence for violating article 11-W of the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) which involves “printing, publishing, or disseminating any material to incite hatred.” He also was given a three-year sentence for violating article 298-C of the Pakistani Penal Code, for a total of eight years. (Section 298 of Pakistan’s penal code criminalizes acts and speech that insult a religion or religious beliefs or defile the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, a place of worship, or religious symbols.) Mazhar Abbas was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for violating article 11-W of the ATA. Mr. Shakoor filed a writ petition for bail and appeal against the verdict with the Lahore High Court. On multiple occasions the Lahore High Court listed Mr. Shakoor’s appeal on the daily docket, but each time the case was postponed. The last postponed hearing date was believed to be June 22, 2017.

Mr. Shakoor remains in prison and is suffering from a hernia and back pain.



For more information on Pakistan, see p. 23.

PATRIARCH ABUNE ANTONIOS



COUNTRY

Eritrea

KEY FACT

Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

DETAINED SINCE

May 27, 2007

USCIRF ADVOCATE

Commissioner Thomas Reese

BIOGRAPHY

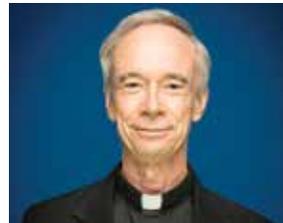
Patriarch Abune Antonios was born on July 12, 1927, in Himberti, a town north of the Eritrean capital, Asmara. He was ordained as the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo Church in 2004.

At age five, Patriarch Antonios was sent by his father to be educated at the Debre Tsege Abuna Andrewes monastery. Serving as a monk, he was ordained a priest in 1942 and an abbot in 1955. In 1994, Antonios was one of five abbots sent to Egypt to establish a Holy Synod for what would become the autocephalous Eritrean Orthodox Church, one of the largest religious denominations in Eritrea. On June 19, 1994, Antonios was ordained as Bishop Antonios of Hamasien-Asmara in Saint Mark's Cathedral in Cairo by His Holiness Shenouda III, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and returned to Eritrea.

Very early in his reign as Patriarch, Abune Antonios confronted state interference within his church. He resisted government demands that he excommunicate 3,000 members and protested the arrest of priests. On January 20, 2006, authorities notified Patriarch Antonios he would be removed as Patriarch and placed him under house arrest.

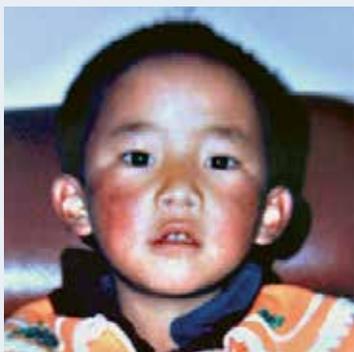
One year later, on January 20, 2007, authorities confiscated Patriarch Antonios' personal pontifical insignia.

On May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government replaced Patriarch Antonios with Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home, and detained him at an undisclosed location. Patriarch Antonios continues to be held incommunicado and is reportedly being denied medical care despite suffering from severe diabetes. On July 16, 2017, authorities allowed Antonios to make a public appearance for the first time in over a decade. While under heavy security, Antonios attended Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Asmara, but was prevented from giving a sermon or subsequently speaking with congregants. Three days later, on July 19, the government moved Antonios to a new location, reportedly to provide better living conditions.



For more information on Eritrea, see p. 19.

GEDHUN CHOEKYI NYIMA – THE PANCHEN LAMA



COUNTRY

China

KEY FACT

11th Panchen Lama

DISAPPEARED SINCE

May 17, 1995

USCIRF ADVOCATE

Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee

BIOGRAPHY

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was born on April 25, 1989, in Lhari County, Tibet. After the death of the 10th Panchen Lama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama chose Gedhun on May 15, 1995, to be the 11th Panchen Lama, which is the second-highest position in Tibetan Buddhism.

Three days after his selection as Panchen Lama, Chinese government authorities kidnapped then six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family. On November 11, 1995, Chinese authorities announced their own pick to serve as the Panchen Lama: Gyancaïn Norbu.

Most Tibetans reject this choice, as well as the government's interference in their religious practices. The Chinese government maintains strict control over Tibetan Buddhists, suppressing their cultural and religious practices. Government-led raids on monasteries continue, and Chinese party officials in Tibet infiltrate monasteries with Communist Party propaganda and officials.

In the more than 20 years since Gedhun's abduction, Chinese authorities have provided little information about his whereabouts, alleging that they need to protect him from being "kidnapped by

separatists." In May 2007, Asma Jahangir, then United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, suggested that the Chinese government allow an independent expert to visit and confirm Gedhun's well being. On July 17, 2007, the Chinese authorities said that he is a "perfectly ordinary Tibetan boy" attending school and leading a normal life, and that he "does not wish to be disturbed." Authorities say that the state employs both of his parents and that his brothers and sisters are either working or at university.



For more information on China, see p. 18. .

GULMIRA IMIN



COUNTRY

China

KEY FACT

Website administrator and
Uighur Muslim

DETAINED SINCE

July 14, 2009

CHARGES

Splittism, leaking state secrets, and
organizing an illegal demonstration

SENTENCE

Life imprisonment

USCIRF ADVOCATE

Vice Chairwoman Sandra Jolley

BIOGRAPHY

Gulmira Imin is a Uighur Muslim and former web administrator for the Uighur-language website Salkin. Ms. Imin was also a government employee in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China. Xinjiang is home to the majority of the country's Uighur Muslim population.

Ms. Imin was born in Aksu in Xinjiang and graduated in 2000 from the Chinese-Uighur translation department of Xinjiang University. In spring 2009, Ms. Imin became the moderator of Salkin, a Uighur-language culture and news website to which she had previously contributed poetry and short stories. Many of her online writings criticized government policies.

On July 5, 2009, Ms. Imin participated in a major demonstration protesting the deaths of Uighur migrant workers in Guangdong Province. Initially peaceful, the protests turned violent, with about 200 people, including ethnic Han Chinese, killed during the riots and confrontations with police. On July 14, 2009, Ms. Imin was arrested in Aksu after authorities alleged she had organized the protests, posted an announcement for them on Salkin, and leaked state secrets by phone to her husband in Norway. Her family was not notified of the arrest and was unaware of her location until the October

2009 airing of a China Central Television documentary that depicted Imin in prison garb.

On April 1, 2010, the Urumqi Intermediate People's Court sentenced Ms. Imin to life in prison under articles 103, 111, and 296 of China's Criminal Law on charges of "splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration." She alleges she was tortured and forced to sign documents while in detention. She reportedly was not allowed to meet with her lawyer until the trial. Her appeal subsequently was rejected. Ms. Imin is currently detained in the Xinjiang Women's Prison (Xinjiang No. 2 Prison) located in Urumqi, where she is allowed one family visit every three months.



For more information on China, see p. 18.

RAIF BADAWI



COUNTRY

Saudi Arabia

KEY FACT

Blogger

DETAINED SINCE

June 27, 2012

CHARGES

Insulting Islam and breaking the anti-cybercrime law

SENTENCE

10-year imprisonment, 1,000 lashes, a fine of one million riyals, and 10-year travel and media ban following release

USCIRF ADVOCATE

Commissioner Clifford D. May

BIOGRAPHY

Raif Badawi is a blogger and human rights activist who cofounded the website Free Saudi Liberals in 2008. Badawi and his colleagues intended for the website to encourage debate on religious and political issues in Saudi Arabia despite the country's restricted civic space.

Badawi faced harassment and questioning following the creation of Free Saudi Liberals, beginning with charges of insulting Islam in 2008, continuing through a 2009 travel ban and asset freeze, and culminating in his June 2012 arrest and December 2012 trial on charges of insulting Islam. Evidence for this charge reportedly included posts on Free Saudi Liberals that criticized Saudi religious authorities and raised theological questions. The Saudi courts originally also recommended charging Badawi with apostasy, a crime punishable by death, reportedly due to his liking a Saudi Christian Facebook page and saying that "Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists are all equal." The judge dropped this charge after Badawi stated that he was a Muslim and recited the Islamic declaration of faith.

In July 2013, a Saudi court sentenced Badawi to 600 lashes and seven years in prison for insulting Islam and breaking the anti-cybercrime law by founding a liberal website. Following an appeal of the sentence, a criminal court resented him in May 2014 to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, a one million riyal fine, and a

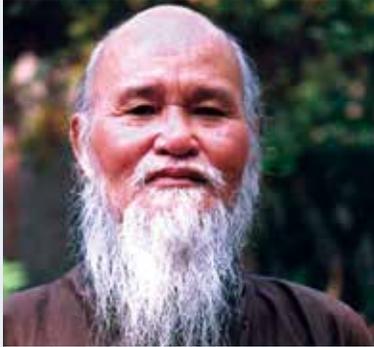
10-year travel and media ban following release. Badawi received the first 50 lashes in January 2015 in front of Al Juffali Mosque in Jeddah. Following an international outcry and a medical doctor's finding that Badawi could not physically endure more lashings, no further lashings have yet been carried out. However, in June 2015 and March 2017, Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court upheld the sentence of 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes.

In December 2015, the European Parliament honored Badawi with the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, which his wife Ensaf Haidar accepted on his behalf. Haidar, who is now based in Quebec, Canada, with their three children, campaigns tirelessly for Badawi's release and serves as president of the Raif Badawi Foundation for Freedom.



For more information on Saudi Arabia, see p. 25.

THICH QUANG DO



COUNTRY

Vietnam

KEY FACT

Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam; advocate for religious freedom, democracy, and human rights for Vietnam

DETAINED SINCE

October 8, 2003

CHARGES

Never formally charged for his most recent detention; accused of “possessing state secrets”

SENTENCE

House arrest at Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City

USCIRF ADVOCATE

Vice Chairwoman Kristina Arriaga

BIOGRAPHY

Most Venerable Thich Quang Do was born on November 27, 1928, in Thai Binh Province. Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) since 2008, Thich Quang Do has been a lifelong advocate for democracy, religious freedom, and human rights.

Vietnamese authorities have repeatedly targeted, harassed, and detained Thich Quang Do both for practicing his faith and for his tireless advocacy for religious freedom and related human rights. For example, in 2001, he launched a plan called “Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam,” which was supported by more than 300,000 Vietnamese from different faith backgrounds, as well as international stakeholders. As a result, the government placed him under administrative detention without trial at Thanh Minh Zen Monastery and prevented him from receiving medical treatment despite suffering from diabetes.

During a brief reprieve beginning in June 2003, Thich Quang Do attempted to participate in a UBCV Assembly called by then Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang. But in October 2003, authorities accused him of “possessing

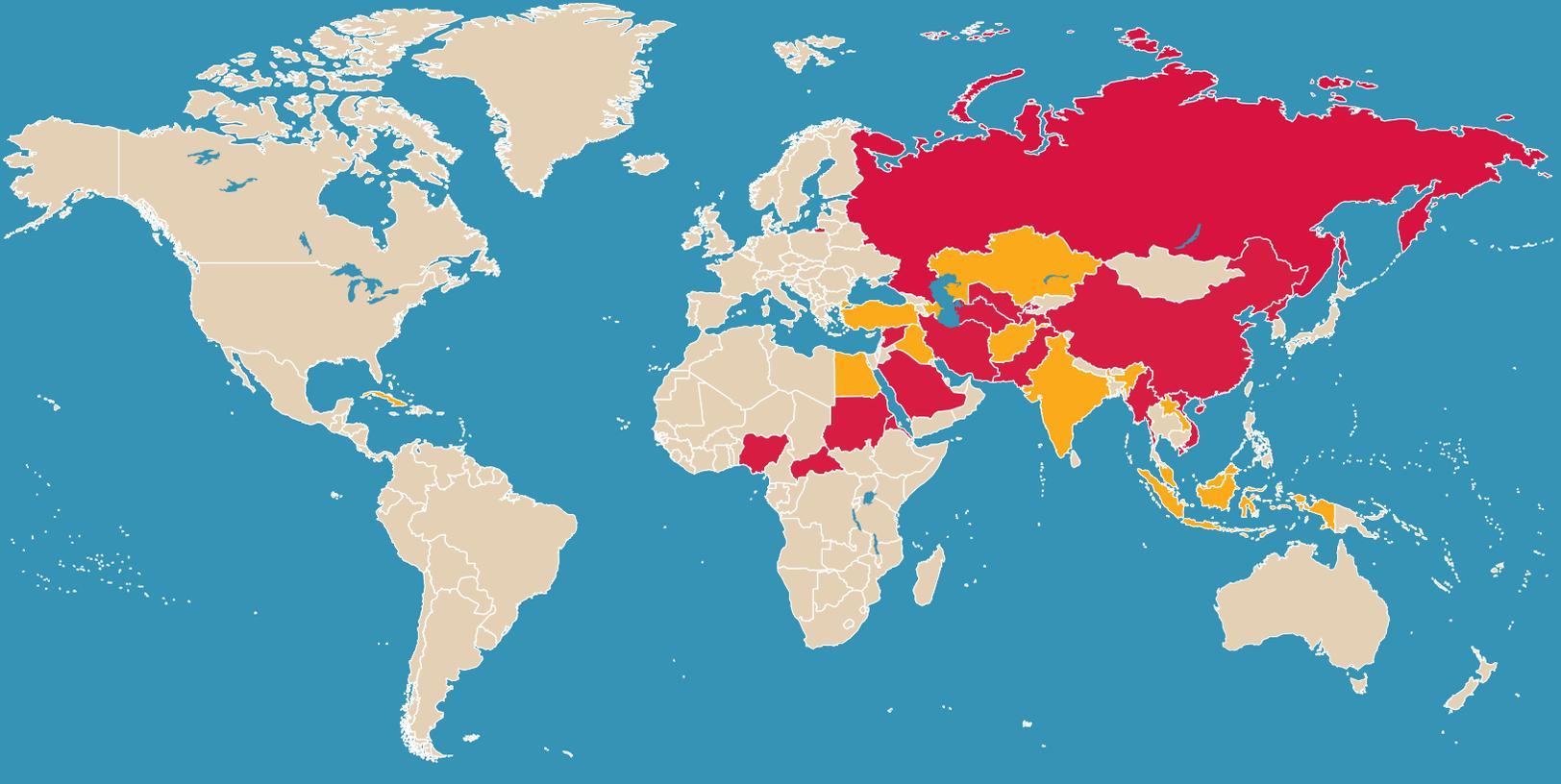
state secrets” and again confined him to Thanh Minh Zen Monastery where he has been under constant surveillance and effective house arrest ever since.

In 2018, Thich Quang Do will turn 90. Despite the Patriarch’s age and declining health, Vietnamese authorities continue to surveil the monastery, enforce his confinement, and consistently deny him access to medical care.

USCIRF most recently met with Thich Quang Do at Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in August 2015.



For more information on Vietnam, see p. 31.



2 0 1 8 C O U N T R I E S

■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Burma | Iran | Russia | Tajikistan |
| Central African Republic | Nigeria | Saudi Arabia | Turkmenistan |
| China | North Korea | Sudan | Uzbekistan |
| Eritrea | Pakistan | Syria | Vietnam |

■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

- | | | | |
|-------------|-------|------------|----------|
| Afghanistan | Cuba | Indonesia | Laos |
| Azerbaijan | Egypt | Iraq | Malaysia |
| Bahrain | India | Kazakhstan | Turkey |



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